DOCTOR WHO
NOVELLAS

NIGHTDREAMERS

TOM ARDEN

Tom Arden

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For Paul Whiteley

FOREWORD

Perchance to Dream

‘No worries, consider it done.’

I beamed assuredly down the telephone, adopting some of my Aussie persona in preparation for my Sydney return. Such a simple request. Read this new novella by Tom Arden and put pen to paper.

The best laid plans of mice and ageing actresses …

I arrived in Sydney after a mammoth flight at 6am minus my house keys (a massive and very heavy bunch, which resembles those of a professional housebreaker). They were sitting happily on top of my mother’s cooker in London while I was sitting unhappily by my front door. I had three million things to do (licence for creative truth, it was actually only 950). Christmas was champing at the bit, waiting to slide down my non-existent chimney, and a monster pile of mail, normally put aside for that ‘later thing’ or for filing, under ‘toaster’, was tackled while I sat on the doorstep, awaiting an overworked, ‘no worries’, ‘consider it done’ locksmith. I discovered I had an additional piece of baggage belonging, it turned out, to an overexcitable lady from Israel. But wait. There’s more. In that pile of mail was one missive informing me that an exit from my beautiful apartment would be appreciated as the owners would like to move back in. Yikes! Now that really sucks over Christmas. Didn’t Mary and Joseph hit a snag like this? On top of all this, a little voice nagged that I had to read this novella thing.

‘Get someone to do it for you,’ and ‘Shove it under the toaster,’ my gremlin thoughts persisted.

No! No! Noooooooo!

‘Just do it.’ As a famous sneaker once said.

Wow! What a wonderful wacky adventure awaited me.

The character of Josephine Grant (or Jo as we know her) was not the young school leaver that I fondly remember creating some years ago, but a more mature young lady.

Tom Arden’s book catapulted me far, far away from my remaining tasks and impending Christmas concerns and deposited me into a psychedelic tapestry, woven with futuristic threads of Alice in

Wonderland, A Midsummer Night's Dream and other deliciously bizarre imaginings from Tom's mind (and what a place that must be!).

When I perchance to dream, I can think of nowhere better to visit than the beautiful wooded moon of Verd, where there are no piles of letters demanding replies, where keys never go missing and where no-one wants you to vacate your home at a moment's notice.

Katy Manning Actress, Jo Grant 1971 - 1973 December 2001

Nightdreamers

We are such stuff As dreams are made on; and our little life Is rounded with a sleep

What is reality?

What are dreams?

Like fools, we think such questions are easy to answer. They are not: these things we struggle to keep distinct, like good and evil, or the many streams of time, have a troublesome tendency to flow together. There is what we see at first; there is what we see in the future - and what comes welling up from the past. There is what is on the surface, and what lies beneath. Everywhere, life is a confusing thing, and often death makes it more confusing still.

Perhaps we should think of life as a battle, fought against an enemy whose features are never clear - or as a play, performed by actors who do not quite know their parts. Or, perhaps, life is like a dark nursery, filled with mysterious toys - toys that might look comforting or menacing, according to your particular point of view.

It is in some such nursery that our tale is about to begin.

The time is long ago on a distant, strange moon …

‘One kiss, just one -‘

‘My lord, please -‘

Gasping, Lady Ria of Verd struggled free from Lord Esnic’s arms. Esnic lunged, to no avail. She pushed him and he staggered back, crashing into the rocking-horse.

The shabby thing, toppled, and Esnic sprawled.

Ria laughed. How silly he looked, his dignity all gone!

But Esnic did not look silly for long. His visored cap had fallen free. In the dim light, his cheekbones jutted with shadowy sharpness - and Ria saw, clearly enough, the expression that flickered across his face.

It was a look of hatred.

She turned away, grabbing up her electro-candle from the floor where it had fallen.

Despairingly, she looked about her old nursery. How forlorn it seemed now, with its scattered toys and picture-books and musty dressing-up clothes!

Cobwebbed red curtains hung all about the walls; fallen in places, they revealed the riveted iron panels from which the castle was built. Round windows punctuated the cold metal like a ship’s portholes. And indeed, thought Ria, what was outside was a sea of sorts, a place where sometimes she had fancied she might drown. Dark, choking branches scraped against the glass, silvery and sinister in the planetlight.

Ria shuddered. Perihelion Night had come so soon. By morning, one way or the other, her destiny would be decided. And Ria was determined she would decide it for herself.

She breathed hard, steadying herself.

Get rid of Esnic. Just get rid of him.

‘My lord, forgive my impetuous play,’ Ria said with a smile, sweeping

back her long, raven-black hair. ‘You startled me, appearing here. Why, you should not even lay eyes upon me before the morrow - let alone kiss me,’ she added, casting down her eyes.

Lithely, the nobleman returned to his feet. Grabbing his guard’s cap, he jammed it back down over his cropped, colourless hair. ‘Your beauty made me forget myself, my dear. Not to mention the danger you’re in.’

Danger? You’re my danger.

‘I assure you, my lord, I’m quite safe.’

‘I feared you were sleepwalking.’

‘What? And me, not in my night attire?’

‘Indeed,’ Esnic said pointedly. ‘Your cape … your gloves … your high boots. And wandering here - alone.’ The words hung like an accusation.

‘You followed me?’ said Ria.

‘My men regularly patrol these apartments. For us, no part of this castle is ever closed.’

‘Your men,’ Ria murmured. ‘But you?’

‘Come, one cannot trust one’s underlings too much. Each night I choose a corner of the castle and inspect it myself - and tonight, I chose here.’

A likely story.

Ria bit her lip. ‘And this is how you spend the night before your wedding?’ ‘And this is how you spend the night before yours?’ Esnic countered. The reply stung.

Don’t show you hate him.

Forcing a smile, Ria set the wooden horse back on its rocker, smoothing its rough mane.

‘Is it not natural,’ she mused, ‘that a bride, before her wedding, should look once more upon the scenes of her girlhood? You forget, this was

once my world.'

'Forget? How could I? Many a time I would visit you here.' Esnic looked levelly into Ria's eyes. 'And many a time I thanked the gods for my betrothal to so sweet a girl … But think, my dear, of the gravity decay, creeping through this castle like a cancer. Don't you know this wing is unsafe?'

'My lord, I have grown up here on Verd. Am I not used to the quirks of gravity?' Ria gestured to the window, where the dark woods seemed to press ever closer. 'You'll be warning me about the Nightdreamers next. Don't they say they're out in force, every time Perihelion Night comes round?'

'There are other threats.' Esnic stepped forward.

'Prince Tonio?' A coolness, even coldness, entered Ria's voice, as if the mere name filled her with distaste. 'My wicked cousin is gone - isn't he?'

'Oh, he's banished.'

Esnic took Ria in his arms again. This time, she did not push him away.

'My dear,' he murmured, 'remember whose daughter you are - and whose wife you soon will be.'

His face softened, and Ria had to admit to herself that he was a remarkably handsome man.

But a cruel man. A deceiving man.

She faltered, 'My lord, I … I think you should go.'

'Go? Silly girl, I must escort you back to your quarters.'

'But leave me for a moment - Just a moment, to linger in this girlhood scene.'

With a smile, Esnic smoothed the dark leather of his uniform. He bowed, withdrawing.

'As you wish, my lady. But what a trial, to leave you even for the shortest time! I can hardly forget that only one more night divides us from our wedded bliss.'

Ria cast down her eyes. Say the right thing.

‘Sir, I long for our lawful union.’

‘Of course you do.’ The nobleman slipped back, kissing her quickly. ‘Ah, how happy was the day of our betrothal - and how much more so must the morrow be! For now, my dear, I leave you … But just for now.’

The door spiralled open, and Esnic was gone.

Left alone, Ria glanced about her anxiously. The hated man might return at once; in the corridor, he might call up this chamber on the visifinder.

He could be watching her now.

With pretended nonchalance she ran her hands over a spangled cape, a stuffed tiger, the sloping roof of a dolls’ house. Many a time, in her fine new apartments, Ria had longed to be a girl again, here among her old playthings. Why should she be a woman, when all it could mean was marriage to her father’s captain of guards?

But that was before Tonio - Tonio, Tonio!

Swiftly, she made for a panel in the wall. She punched a keypad and the panel slid back, revealing the servo-shaft that led up to the battlements. As a child she had climbed it, and the climb was long and arduous.

Not any more. She flung her electro-candle into the shaft. As she expected, it swooped into the air.

Yes, the gravity decay had reached this far …

Trembling, Ria stepped into the shaft.

§

‘Doctor, are you sure that’s Metebelis III?’

Jo Grant looked doubtfully at the scanner, wondering if they could really have reached their destination. It seemed unlikely. Something strange had happened when the Doctor set the controls, but quite what it had been, Jo could not say. She wondered if she had blacked out, just for a moment. And if the Doctor had blacked out, too.

‘A fascinating phenomenon, Jo,’ he was saying. Lying on his back beneath the white, hexagonal console of the TARDIS, his often unreliable time-and-space vehicle, the Doctor was busy with the little multi-purpose instrument he called the sonic screwdriver.

‘There we were,’ he said, over its high-pitched whirrings, ‘ready to jump the dimensional vortex, when something held us back. Cosmic rays, I wonder? But what sort? Jo, did I ever tell you there are eight million, five thousand, three hundred and sixty-six different types of cosmic rays?’

‘You didn’t,’ said Jo with a sigh. ‘But you did promise that this time we really were going to - what do you call it, “the famous blue planet of the Acteon Galaxy”? I think I could use a good holiday, after Spiridon.’

With a shudder, Jo recalled the inhospitable jungle planet, where an invasion force of ten thousand Daleks had been preparing to take over the galaxy. Then, too, she thought briefly of Latep, the young Thal man who had fallen in love with her. He had wanted her to return with him to his home planet Skaro, but Jo had refused, not wanting to leave the Doctor, or the prospect of returning to Earth. She felt she had made the right decision. But every so often there were pangs of regret.

Shaking her head, Jo returned her thoughts to Metebelis III. ‘But do you really think we’re there now?’

‘What’s that? We’ll be landing in no time, Jo - just let me patch up the transmatter stabiliser, won’t take more than a …’

There was a bang and a cloud of smoke billowed from under the console, briefly obscuring the brilliant, gleaming whiteness of the control room.

Jo waved at the air. ‘Some repair man you are!’

‘What’s that, Jo?’ coughed the Doctor, staggering upright.

A tall, well-built man, dressed in the velvet and lace of an Edwardian dandy, the Time Lord presented an imposing figure. Though his age was numbered in many centuries, in appearance he remained a vigorous man in late middle age, with a lined but ruggedly handsome face.

The lines deepened now, as he peered at the controls.

‘I don’t suppose you have any sealing wax, Jo?’ he said, disappearing beneath the console again.

‘Would chewing gum do?’ said Jo.

‘You have some?’

Jo rolled her eyes. Sporting a fluffy waist-length coat above a minidress and high, white boots, she was a strikingly pretty young woman with wide hazel eyes and blonde hair that fell about her face in soft cascades. In the course of many adventures, Jo had proven herself fiercely loyal to the Doctor, but nonetheless had never entirely trusted him, least of all in anything practical. To his companion, the Time Lord was like a beloved but exasperating uncle, the sort whose wild ways might have troubled his family for years, but whose charm and dubious enthusiasms made him somehow impossible to resist.

She glanced again at the scanner. With its silvery, ominous-looking swirl of clouds, the world below them was hardly likely to be the celebrated blue planet Metebelis III, renowned throughout the universe for its astonishing beauty.

And what about that moon, orbiting above? ‘It’s getting closer,’ she said aloud.

‘And it’s green.’ ‘Jo, what are you talking about? We’re in the space-time vortex, or haven’t you noticed?’ ‘Then what’s that on the scanner?’

‘That’s it!’ The Doctor sat up suddenly, bumping his head on the underside of the console. ‘That explains the anomaly. Something’s pulling us back - something trans-dimensional. But that would have to have the most enormous power!’

‘Doctor,’ said Jo, ‘I haven’t a clue what you mean. But look at that moon - it’s getting bigger all the time.’

Puzzled, the Doctor peered above the console, absently rubbing his hand through his silver mane of hair. He scrambled up. ‘You should have told me - Jo, this is most interesting.’

‘It’s a moon,’ said Jo. Really, the Doctor could be infuriating sometimes! ‘You can see the planet behind.’

‘I can see it’s a moon, Jo - and it’s covered in forest.’

‘That’s interesting?’ Jo asked flatly.

‘For a moon of that size, yes.’

While Jo studied her fingernails, the Doctor stroked his chin, muttering about ratios of density and mass. Hastily, he punched figures into the central computer.

Tickertape reeled from the console.

‘Just as I thought. This moon’s even smaller than Earth’s, Jo. And look at that atmosphere - not to mention that dense vegetation. Where does the gravity come from, answer me that?’

‘You’re asking me? Doctor, I don’t know about you, but I was looking forward to Metebelis III. In fact, right now, I’d settle for just going home.’

The Doctor gazed at her mournfully. ‘My dear girl, I’m afraid that’s out of the question. You said it yourself. That moon’s getting bigger - because we’re heading straight for it.’

Jo’s brow furrowed. ‘Can’t we just … leave?’

‘That’s just it. We can’t.’

§

Whirling up from the servo-shaft, Lady Ria of Verd hurtled into her heels kicking behind her like an eager the dark air, swimmer’s, her silvery cape billowing. Below, the iron battlements of the castle loomed like jutting fangs; beyond, the woods glimmered, deep and thick, in the silvery planetlight of Galaxis Bright.

And a figure swam towards her.

In the style of the royal court on the planet above, the figure, a tall, fair young man, was dressed in a flowing purple toga with golden bands circling his wrists and ankles, his forehead and his neck. In the barely present gravity, his hair waved with sinuous luxuriance.

To Ria, there had never been a finer vision of manly beauty. ‘Tonio … Tonio!’ she gasped.

The cousins rushed together. Embracing, they sank to the top of the east tower, where the moon’s erratic gravity still held sway. As if in a dream, her hand trembling, Ria smoothed her lover’s undulating, soft,

straw-blond hair.

‘Darling, you’re sure you can face this?’ he breathed.

She nodded, looking into the beloved eyes. ‘Foolish boy, what could make me change?

I’m sad to leave my father, but he’s lost his mind. What else could have made him banish you, his own nephew?’

‘A fellow called Esnic, perhaps?’ was the reply.

‘Ugh! Don’t mention his name!’

Smiling, Tonio gestured to the great disc of Galaxis Bright, hovering above them like a heavenly promise. ‘Soon you’ll be safe in my father’s palace.’

This, Ria suspected, might not be quite true. Dominated by Galaxis Dark, its powerful sister planet, Galaxis Bright was hardly a haven. There was talk of war, of insurrection; lately, rumour even said that her mother’s brother, the Emperor, had gone into hiding.

Ria would not trouble herself with such thoughts now. Her eyes misted, gazing on the planet she had left as an infant, but still thought of as home.

She sighed. ‘How close it seems.’

‘Never more than on Perihelion Night.’

‘And yet how far … Tonio, where’s your Lightship?’

‘Gravity Well Six.’

Ria was alarmed. ‘So far?’

‘Could I dare land closer?’ Solemnly, Tonio gestured down at the woods. ‘And I think we’d better swim between these trees, not above them, don’t you?’

‘What about your scrambler?’

‘The sensors won’t pick us up - but Esnic’s guards? They’ve got eyes - and I’ve had a few near misses tonight … Let’s Just hope no one attacks the Lightship. I don’t want to use the Vorgon ray.’

Ria shuddered. She had been alarmed when Tonio told her about this dangerous new weapon. Developed by a scientist called Munex Axis, it was intended to be used against Galaxis Dark. Knowing that her cousin's Lightship had been equipped with the ray, Ria could only hope it would never be used here on Verd.

'Ready?' He clutched her hand.

Regret lurched in Ria's heart for all that she was leaving; doubts crowded in on her for what might lie ahead. But love compelled her on. They stepped towards the tower's brink. Now, they must launch themselves into the sea-like woods.

Ria gulped. 'Perhaps we'll catch a Nightdreamer,' she said with false brightness.

'Catch one, my old nurse used to say, take it as hostage to the Nightdreamer King -

then he must make all your dreams come true.'

'Silly girl,' said Tonio, 'can't I do that?'

'Oh, yes … Tonio, yes!'

'Or perhaps you mean no,' came a dry voice.

They swivelled round. It was Esnic. Sinister in his dark uniform, eyes invisible under his visored cap, he stepped out of the shadows, a menacing phaser gleaming in his hand.

'Tonio, quick -' Ria lurched to the battlements.

A blast scorched from the phaser. Tonio fell.

'No!' Ria cried, as guards surrounded her.

§

'Doctor, you mean we'll crash?'

A thick, dark forest filled the scanner. Tickertape in fresh streams curled from the console.

'Curiouser and curiouser.' Eagerly, the Doctor inspected the long strips of equations. 'Something's giving this moon its gravity, Jo. But not giving it evenly -

look.' He sifted through the tickertape, but it was too tangled already, and he threw it over his shoulder, exasperated. 'Anyway, on parts of this moon there's Earth-like gravity. That's what anchors the atmosphere. Elsewhere, the gravity's lower than on your moon.'

'Fascinating, Doctor, but I -'

Jo would have said more, but the TARDIS lurched violently. They staggered. Roundels flashed in the walls and the glowing, transparent column in the centre of the console wheezed up and down.

'Didn't I tell you we'd crash?' Jo cried.

'What? We're well above the surface -'

'Yes, but for how long?'

The buffetings grew more violent. Jo collapsed. Uselessly, the Doctor struggled with the controls. 'Something down there wants us. And it won't let us go -'

Jo said suddenly, 'The Nightdreamer King.'

She had spoken in a voice quite unlike her own.

'What? Jo, what did you say?'

Dazed on the floor, she could hardly answer - only look on as the mysterious moon was replaced by a vision of swirling colours, streaming from the scanner like a fantastic dream.

The Doctor sank down, clutching the console.

Jo screamed, the colours exploding in her mind.

§

'I'm fed up!'

A sigh escaped on the night air.

Then came another, followed by a groan.

The solitary occupant of a gravity well deep in the woods, sitting on a fallen log, was a little man dressed all in green - green tights, green leather Jerkin, green cap with a hanging bell. He even wore pointy, curly-toed shoes, and the shoes were green too.

He rested his cheek on a bunched hand, looking round forlornly at the planetlit clearing, a pungent place of squashed berries and dropped cones and crisping, carpeting leaves, of shimmerings and rustlings, of shy, skittering nightbirds and peering, snooty-faced little rodents that would scurry silently for cover when they thought they were observed.

'The fun's gone out of it, that's the trouble,' said the little green man, as if he were speaking to someone else. 'Remember, Majesty, when I was new in your service? I always wanted mischief, and you gave it to me - how you gave it to me! But I miss my freedom, Majesty - I miss my brother, too … if I had a brother. Didn't I have a brother once, and lose him?'

He struck the side of his head, and his bell jingled.

'Oh my memory, my memory! I'm not sure I can even remember my brother's name now, my brain's so addled. Why's that, Majesty - can you tell me why? But no, you're not even listening, are you?'

Leaping up, the little man paced restlessly. 'I'm just not appreciated, am I? Oh, I wish I could break free, I wish … I wish I could do some mischief!' He kicked a log, hurt his foot, hopped about a little, and plumped himself down again. 'I'm bored, bored,' he almost shouted. 'Perihelion Night, and I'm bored.' He looked up at the sky. Then the little man's eyes widened, and a wicked grin split his face from ear to ear. 'What's this, what's this? Humans from the castle, coming this way? What luck!' He clapped his hands, twirled in a circle, and launched into a capering dance. Sparklings, like green cinders, played about his heels, and he sang the following ditty:

My name is Sly And I shall try To cause some sweet dissension: This human crew Will come to rue My mischievous intention!

His song completed, the little man rubbed his hands, grinned again, then scampered off and concealed himself in the shimmering, rustling trees.

§

'The planet's full tonight.'

'Of course it's full, fool.'

'What? Full, full?'

‘No - fool, fool. Idiot.’

‘Who are you calling an idiot?’

‘You! It’s Perihelion. Did you bring your costume?’

Peterkin the cobbler and Mazy Grace the chambermaid pushed through the trees and alighted in the circle of trodden vegetation and fallen logs that was Gravity Well Six. Landing behind them came their companions Gubrious, the castle chaplain, Nora, the cook, and the gardener, whose name was Weed.

‘Are you sure this was a good idea?’ said Gubrious, to no one in particular. As chaplain, he was a cut above his lowly companions, and did not like them to forget it. He rather wished he had not agreed to this folly. ‘Out in the woods at Perihelion, I never heard the like.’

‘What are you worried about?’ said Nora. ‘You took a phaser, didn’t you? I’m in a lot more trouble, let me tell you, if that new butler finds out I’m gone. He’s a terror and make no mistake.’

Weed thought there were terrors closer to hand. ‘G-Gubrious is right. The Nightdreamers will get us, mark my words.’

Quite what the Nightdreamers might be, neither the gardener nor the chaplain could have explained. They knew only that, over the years, a great many servants -

courtiers, too - had disappeared from the castle.

Then, of course, there was the Duchess …

Mazy Grace was in no mood for Nightdreamers. ‘Let them come,’ she scoffed, ‘if they dare. We’ll catch them - or the monster will! Eh, Peterkin?’

The cobbler was busy getting into his costume, an absurd affair of tinselly scales and a big knobbly painted head, made from papier-mâché. Nora dug him in the ribs, and he yelled.

‘I’m not a real monster, you know. It’s only pretend.’

‘Hark at the man,’ said Mazy Grace. ‘And I’m not a real princess. But we’ve got our parts.’

‘Parts?’ said Peterkin, a little alarmed.

They had come into the woods to rehearse the play they would perform on the morrow, in celebration of the marriage of Lord Esnic and Lady Ria. According to tradition, the marriage would take place at dawn after Perihelion Night, when omens were most auspicious for future happiness.

Imperiously, Mazy Grace made the others take their places. ‘Come on, just think of Lady Ria. Did I tell you, I’ve had a peek at her dress? How lovely she’ll look!’

‘I don’t think Esnic will,’ Weed mumbled.

‘Of course he won’t,’ said Mazy Grace, ‘he’s the groom. Oh, it’s going to be such a wedding, isn’t it, Nora?’

‘Wait till you see my menu,’ said the cook. ‘Don’t worry, there’ll be leftovers for us all.’

‘Now, come on,’ said Mazy Grace, ‘rehearsal time.’

The play, a hoary old classic from Galaxis Bright, was The Tragical and Comical History of Boreas and Thamia, or The Complications of Love. It concerned a beautiful young princess (Mazy Grace, though hardly young, insisted on playing this part) whose father kept her imprisoned behind a high wall. Luckily, there was a prince who would set her free, but the princess (who had spoken to him only through a crack in the wall) had no idea that a wicked enchanter had turned him into a mouse.

The rehearsal did not get off to a good start. Peterkin had trouble with his lines, Nora kept giggling, and Gubrious, as usual, could only grumble.

‘I’m exhausted,’ he said. ‘Did we really have to swim out to Gravity Well Six?’

‘What are you complaining about?’ snapped Mazy Grace. ‘All you’ve got to do is stand there like a wall.’

Gubrious indicated his clerical collar. ‘Have you no respect for a man of the cloth?’

‘Just shut up and hold up your ivy.’

Such rudeness! Yet of all the players, the chaplain was the best. Perhaps this was because he had no lines. Nora, as the fairy who

promised to change the prince back into a handsome young man, could not help overacting, while Mazy Grace's wide-eyed princess was more annoying than alluring.

There were frequent quarrels, and Gubrious, then Weed, said they should go back to the castle.

Mazy Grace stamped her foot. 'Nora, I appeal to you - Peterkin, to you! We're staying, aren't we?'

The cook, resplendent in gauzy gossamer, thought it best to nod; the cobbler, his voice muffled through the monster's head, supposed doubtfully that it was good they were here. 'We don't want the guards to see us, do we? I mean, I wouldn't want anyone to see me like this.'

'Does he understand we're doing a play?' whispered Weed, lowering his mouse's mask.

Mazy Grace only sighed, swished her royal robes, and clipped her cardboard tiara more firmly to her hair.

The end of the play was the hardest part. Just when Weed lifted Mazy Grace to freedom, Nora's mischievous magic turned the man back into a mouse. Away ran the princess, screaming into the woods, where she wandered for long years (they were not quite sure how to show this) until one day the mouse found her and saved her from a monster (the monster, fortunately, being also afraid of mice). The mouse's bravery released him from the enchanter's spell, and the lovers were reunited.

Nothing right. Gubrious, as the wall, did not like being scaled - in fact, he fell over; Weed had trouble, quite a lot, in changing from man to mouse; while the kindly Peterkin could not attack Mazy Grace, even in play.

'Again,' she commanded. 'Come on, Peterkin - charge!'

'Get a good run-up, that's the way,' said Weed, yawning.

'And roar,' said Nora. 'Remember to roar.'

Peterkin said he would do his best, but he could not see very well from beneath the monster's head. Again he charged, even roared this time -

and floundered past Mazy Grace, crashing into the foliage at the side of the gravity well.

There was a loud, metallic BONG!

‘What was that?’ Weed was awake now.

‘Something’s behind those branches,’ said Nora.

‘Something big,’ gulped Gubrious. ‘Very big.’

‘Nightdreamers, it has to be,’ said Weed.

‘Don’t be silly,’ said Mazy Grace, dragging the gibbering Peterkin to his feet.

Fearlessly, she pulled away the branches -and stepped back, puzzled. ‘A spaceship?’

‘It’s a Lightship - look at those markings.’ Gubrious gripped his phaser. ‘But here … why?’

There was no time to marvel at the mysterious craft. At that moment another sound filled the clearing, a stranger sound this time, and the players darted back into the trees.

What could be happening? The sound was like a foghorn. Like an amplified wheezing.

Like an ancient engine failing to start. The sound was like nothing they had heard before.

‘Nightdreamers, I told you!’ Weed’s voice cracked.

Mazy Grace blanched. ‘Weed, you may be right.’

The green moon of Verd was a place of many wonders, but nothing had prepared the players for the sight of a blue box with a flashing light on the top, materialising suddenly in the middle of Gravity Well Six.

The strained wheezing ceased at last, and the TARDIS stood before them. Peeking out from the shadows, Sly's eyes grew wide. A cunning look came over his face, and he rubbed his little hands.

§

'Who dares disturb my meditation?'

The voice boomed like thunder. From beneath the floor an elaborate dais rose slowly to the surface, bearing with it a fearsome-looking white-bearded man. Sitting in a vast, throne-like chair, he was dressed in bejewelled robes.

With burning eyes he gazed around his vast, chilly presence chamber, a place of thick tapestries, shimmering electro-tapers, and many-branched antlered heads, mounted high on the wall. Slowly, almost dazedly, the old man's gaze settled upon Tonio, stunned from a phaser-blast, staggering in the grip of guards.

Esnic stepped forward, tugging a protesting Ria by the wrist. 'Duke Altero, hear me.

I have saved your daughter from the vilest of fates. Had I not intervened, the wicked Prince Tonio would have kidnapped her - on the night before her wedding!'

'Monstrous!' cried the Duke. 'Is there no end to his infamy?'

Ria began, 'Father, don't believe it! It's not true, it's -'

'Silence, child! What are you but a giddy girl, defying your father's wishes?' His wizened hand shaking, the Duke pointed at Tonio. 'I guessed at your fondness for this reprobate. Why should I have banished him, but that I feared this would happen'

'Father, I love him! Father, you can't -'

Tonio interrupted, 'Noble uncle, I beg of you -'

'Silence, I say! Since birth, my child has been betrothed to Lord Esnic - loyal Esnic, who has kept us safe on this moon, repelling all invaders, in my long years of exile from Galaxis Bright. Had I listened to him, should I have allowed you even to land? I see now my folly.'

Tonio's reply came through clenched teeth. 'Uncle, my father spoke of you as the sweetest, kindest of men. What can have happened to turn

you into this tyrant, this -

‘

‘Traitor!’ Esnic struck Tonio across the mouth. Ria cried out. But her lover rallied, and only the firm grip of the guards prevented him from lunging at Esnic, wrestling him to the ground.

‘Uncle, does your minion forget himself? To assault an Emperor’s son -‘

‘Emperor Exis Umane,’ said the Duke, ‘has no authority here. Be grateful, whelp, that my mercy preserves you from punishments still worse. But the first part of your punishment is clear enough. Guards, take him away. Tomorrow, in fetters, he may watch my daughter’s wedding.’

‘No!’ called Ria, as the guards hustled her lover to the doors. ‘Sweet Tonio, I swear, nothing shall make me consent to -‘

‘Child,’ burst out her father, ‘it is not your place to consent or to deny. Until your marriage, you are my property. I have decreed that you marry Lord Esnic, and marry him you will.’

Tears burst from Ria’s eyes. ‘Father, indeed you have become a monster! Think of the happiness we used to know, when Mother was -‘

Duke Altero quivered with rage. ‘Wicked girl, you dare to speak of your mother, whose memory you defile with every word that passes your lips? Esnic, see that she is locked in her apartments. Alas, I fear you will often be her gaoler, until she is brought to a proper wifely submission. But enough, I weary of this worldly folly.

Again, I must descend to my meditation.’

‘Father, please -‘ Ria would have said more, but Esnic twisted her wrist, and she broke off with a cry.

§

‘Jo! Jo, are you all right?’

The TARDIS was still now, and all appeared as normal - except for Jo. The Doctor cradled her head. He peered beneath her eyelids. Lightly, he slapped her face several times.

Jo stirred, but only lolled back again.

‘Not going to talk to me, Jo? Well, you’re breathing. I suppose you’ll come round.’

A little ungallantly, the Doctor propped his companion against one of the high, fluted columns that lined the walls of the TARDIS control room, at intervals between the gleaming roundels. Pondering, the Time Lord paced round the console, his velvet opera cloak swishing behind him. It wasn’t just a fall that had knocked Jo cold. No, it was some power, a power strong enough to enter the TARDIS.

And force it down.

‘What I want to know is, what?’ the Doctor said aloud. ‘Because if I can’t find out, I’ve a feeling we’re not going to be leaving here soon.’

The scanner showed a murk of midnight forest.

‘There’s gravity out there, that much is clear. But how far does it last? And why does it stop? I think I’d better do a little scouting around.’

Jo murmured, ‘Doctor?’

But again she only lolled back.

The Doctor opened the doors, stepping out on to the strange moon. The woods were silent. Curiously he peered up at the silvery planet, hanging ominously in the night sky.

‘What, no welcoming committee? Anyone there?’

He took a step forward, stumbling a little in the tangled clearing. To the side, something gleamed through a layer of vegetation.

‘What’s this? A spacecraft? A mini-cruiser of some kind - designed for humanoids, by the looks of it. And someone’s tried to hide it here. But who?’

The Doctor would have investigated further, but just then there were cries behind him, and figures burst from the woods. He reeled round, but the figures were upon him, knocking him to the ground, pinioning his limbs.

And a phaser was trained at his head.

‘Well, good evening to you, too.’ Bemused, the Doctor surveyed his captors. One appeared to be a princess, if a somewhat elderly one, dressed in royal robes. One, a very fat one, was a fairy in gauzy

gossamer. One was a mouse, or perhaps a rat, though an enormous, tall and gangling one; and one, who looked simply absurd, was some kind of nondescript monster with an enormous, knobbly head.

The one with the phaser was draped in ivy.

‘On your feet,’ hissed the princess, who appeared to be the ringleader. ‘And hands up.’

Dubiously, the Doctor complied. These, he could see, were hardly the most formidable captors. If it weren’t for the phaser, he could have escaped easily - but there were things he needed to know.

He would play along, at least for now.

‘K-Keep him covered, Gubrious,’ said the fairy. ‘We don’t know what tricks he’s got up his sleeve.’

‘Tricks?’ said the Doctor. ‘You’d like to see a trick?’

The monster nodded eagerly, but the mouse trod on his foot.

‘Don’t listen to him, Peterkin,’ came a voice from the under the mask. ‘Nora’s right.

Nightdreamers are devious.’

‘Nightdreamers?’ said the Doctor. ‘I’m no Nightdreamer - whatever that might be. But I was rather wondering about a chap called the Nightdreamer King, if you’d happen to -‘

There were cries of alarm. Fearfully, the mouse and the monster scurried into the undergrowth. ‘Come back, you cowards,’ cried the princess. ‘What’s he going to do, turn us into-‘

‘M-Monsters?’ said the mouse.

‘M-Mice?’ said the monster.

‘He might make us dream, Mazy,’ said the fairy, wide-eyed. ‘I mean, we could be dreaming now.’

‘Shall I give him a blast?’ said the fellow with the phaser. Fortunately, the others did not answer.

‘Look.’ said the princess, ‘don’t you know what this means? Gubrious, Weed - don’t you?’

‘I think I do,’ said the one in the monster’s head.

‘You, Peterkin?’ His friends turned to him, surprised.

‘We’ve c-caught a N-Nightdreamer, haven’t we? And -‘

‘Look,’ said the Doctor, ‘this is all very interesting, but -‘

‘Are we sure he’s a Nightdreamer?’ interrupted Gubrious, his phaser shaking.

‘With tricks like that?’ Mazy Grace gestured to the blue box.

‘He’ll vanish on us again,’ said Nora, ‘won’t he?’

The Doctor was beginning to wish that he could.

‘Of course,’ said Gubrious, ‘It’s a trick. He’ll get away.’

Mazy Grace burst out, ‘Then blast him, you idiot!’

It was what the Doctor had feared. He had wanted to learn what he could from these people, but it looked as if he would not have the chance.

‘Behind you!’ he shouted suddenly, and then ‘Hai!’

With a swift karate kick he lashed out, striking the arm of the man holding the phaser.

Gubrious shrieked. The phaser span from his hand. The Doctor dived for the bushes, but Peterkin was faster.

He seized the phaser, squeezing the trigger. There was a fizzing blast, and the Doctor crashed into the undergrowth, his cloak twisting at an angle over his prone form. For a moment, his limbs jerked and twitched; his eyes flickered, filmy and unseeing.

Then he was still, and his eyes were shut.

‘Peterkin … oh, Peterkin!’ Mazy Grace hugged him joyously. ‘Who’d have thought he had it in him?’ said Nora. Gingerly she inspected the Doctor’s prone form. ‘I say, he is only stunned, I hope?’ Weed was unimpressed. ‘A Nightdreamer can’t get free, once you’ve caught him. Don’t you know anything?’ It was Peterkin who answered. ‘I don’t know much,’ said the simple cobbler, scratching under his papier-mâché head. ‘But I know what you do with a Nightdreamer.’ ‘Of course!’ Nora clapped her hands. ‘Take him to the Nightdreamer King!’ ‘The Nightdreamer King!’ her friends chorused.

The Tragical and Comical History of Boreas and Thamia was abandoned as the players -

even Gubrious, temporarily forgetting himself - linked arms and danced a merry jig.

Their hearts swelled, and each one thought of their wishes that now could come true.

As they danced they sang an old song:

On Perihelion Night Sweet Perihelion Night Weave a circle in the planetlight That shines so bright above - To bless - bless - bless Your dreams of love!

If their dance was clodhopping, and their voices hardly in harmony, it did not matter.

‘Just one thing,’ said Weed, after they had flung themselves down, exhausted. ‘We’ve - puff, puff - all heard these old stories. But what I’ve never known is this. Just -

puff - where is the Nightdreamer King?’

‘What, don’t you know anything?’ came the reply.

And again the others all turned to Peterkin, surprised.

§

Electro-tapers shimmered in metallic corridors as Esnic dragged Ria back to her apartments. At first, she struggled against him, but it was

useless. Tight plasti-rope bound her wrists, and a menacing phaser jabbed into her side.

‘Your father’s right,’ said Esnic with a smile. ‘Already I’m your gaoler. What a pity, that a wife should be so contrary!’

‘I’m not your wife,’ spat Ria. ‘I’ll never be your wife.’

‘Silly girl! What can your cousin give you that I can’t? I suppose he said you’d be Empress of Galaxis Bright one day. Hah! Could you really wish to reign there?

Remember, your father left for a reason.’

‘Shut up about Father. You don’t care about him. You only care about your own power.

You’ve twisted him, changed him-‘

‘Me? What have I done, but serve him well?’

‘Tonio came here to reconcile Father and the Emperor. That’s why he’s here, don’t you realise that? And you poisoned Father against him!’

‘My dear, I think your little cousin has poison enough of his own,’ Esnic said playfully, ‘pretty as his flowing blond locks may be.’

They had reached Ria’s apartments. Esnic tapped a code into the lock. There was more, much more he might have said. Should he, perhaps, hint at the real destiny that lay in wait for the girl, after their marriage?

But no. All in good time.

He turned back to her, smiling. ‘Come, I can’t leave you without a kiss.’

Ria’s eyes blazed, but the hated man only moved closer, pushing up his visor.

‘My love, you know you can’t resist me. Oh, I forgive your dalliance with Tonio.

You’re a weak woman, and I dare say he’s persuasive - but then, so am I.’

What happened next was as unexpected to Ria as to Esnic. With a

swooning surrender she found herself going weak in his arms, huddling against him, clinging to him as if to a strong, beloved protector.

'My darling,' she breathed, 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry -'

The bitter words of moments before might never have been spoken; at once, all was as Esnic desired. Delighted, he embraced the lovely girl - until, suddenly, she snatched the phaser from his belt, and fired.

He staggered back, collapsing.

Firing a second blast, Ria severed the plasti-rope from her wrists. With darting eyes, she looked up and down the gloomy corridor.

What now? Her brow furrowed.

Tonio?

Oh, it was useless! She could hardly free him by herself - not with one phaser.

But the Vorgon ray?

The thought filled Ria's mind, possessed it, before she could even wonder quite what it would mean. Her heart hammered. But how could she get to Tonio's Lightship?

Gravity Well Six was far away. There were guards everywhere.

But the answer was clear.

Swiftly, she stripped off Esnic's uniform.

§

'Doctor?' Jo scrambled to her feet.

Blearily she looked around her. She glanced under the console, as if the Doctor might be hiding there; she peered through the door that led away from the control room, into the inner reaches of the TARDIS.

Again she called the Doctor's name.

Only dimly did Jo recall the colours that had welled out of the scanner. And yet she was aware of a sense of strangeness, pulsing just beneath the surface of her mind.

‘Good evening,’ said a voice.

Startled, Jo spun around to see a little man all in green sitting up on the console, leaning back with insolent luxuriance against the glowing, transparent time rotor in the centre. A bell jingled in his jester’s cap and he swung his legs back and forth, kicking at the air with his curly-toed shoes.

He raised an eyebrow. ‘Who am I? You’d like to know?’

Jo burst out, ‘Of course I would! How did you get in here? And where’s the Doctor?’

‘You need a doctor? Poor girl, you’d better lie down.’

‘Not a doctor, the Doctor!’

Jo was more angry than alarmed. Quizzically, she looked into the little fellow’s face. He appeared to be young, barely more than a boy - if, that is, he was human at all.

Tiny green stars, like cinders, sparkled around him.

The little man blinked at her, grinning foolishly; exasperated, she turned away. It was then that Jo saw the colours in the scanner, churning again. The memory flashed back to her of what had happened, and she was frightened after all.

‘What are you?’ she demanded.

‘First who, then what? Make up your mind!’

With that, the little fellow bounded to the floor, dancing about the console. Colours swirled around him, then strange music, as he half-chanted, half-sang: My name is Sly And I know why You feel an apprehension: But come with me And you will see My sweet and kind intention!

To Jo, there was something almost insane about his wild caperings and high, cracking voice. But there was something more too, a mysterious force churning into her mind, pushing her, compelling her to some frightening psychic precipice. And the thought came to her that this strange little man was not the only danger she faced. Yes, she was certain of it. He was only the agent, only the harbinger of someone - or something - far more dangerous.

She put a hand to her forehead. ‘What … what do you want?’

‘What, no applause? Manners, manners!’

Sly skipped to the doors, and they opened to let him pass.

‘Wait! Come here!’

Quite why Jo should want to catch the little man, and what she would do if she succeeded, she could hardly have explained. But catch him she must. As she stumbled into the clearing, this was her only imperative.

Planetlight glowed all around her, silvery and ghostly, and the strange music continued to play.

Now where was Sly? Jo turned, and turned again.

He was sitting up on a branch, leering down at her with wolfish lips and huge, glowing eyes - and then he was gone.

He was dancing on a fallen log, clicking his heels and kicking high, whirling round and round and wheeling with his arms, cap and bells a-jingle - and then he was gone again.

He was here, he was there, swinging from a hanging vine, springing from a heap of leaves, bursting from a bush, skittering around her with crazy reeling steps, pelting her with pine cones and squashy berries - and then he was nowhere.

There was laughter, and Sly, on a hillock at the edge of the clearing, curled a beckoning finger. Scrambling towards him, Jo lunged, determined to grab him at last -

and almost did, just when the gravity gave way beneath her feet.

Crying out, she swooped into the air.

§

‘Ria … oh, Ria!’

Prince Tonio lay hunched by the door, his knees drawn up to his chest, his head resting on crossed arms. His cell was dark and cramped, the metal walls cold. Though there was no question of sleep, dreams still filled his troubled mind.

Dreams of escape. Of revenge.

And of Ria, always Ria.

He sprang up, pacing. He thumped his fist against the metal wall. He gripped the bars of the high slit window, gazing out at the planet that was his home, glittering like a mockery in the dark night sky.

Galaxis Bright. Oh, Galaxis Bright.

The golden bands at Tonio's wrists and forehead glowed as if in sympathy. But it was a cold, cheerless glow. Shuddering, he drew his robes tighter around him.

'Cursed, cursed be this wretched moon!'

Again the young prince would have sunk down, despairing, but just then there was an electronic fizzing from the corridor. The door slid back and a bespectacled, wild-haired old fellow in a butler's uniform shuffled in, grinning.

At first, Tonio could only gaze at this unexpected visitor, gaping in an astonishment that was half-joy, half-alarm.

He began, 'But … but the guards -'

'Let's just say they called for ale.'

'You … you drugged them?'

'A butler's privilege.' The old fellow laughed, and handed the prince a small silver box. 'A new scrambler - I assume they confiscated yours. This should keep Esnic's thugs off your trail. Now quick, make for the Lightship -'

Tonio reeled, confused. 'But Ria! I've got to set her free -'

'Yes, with the Vorgon ray.'

The prince blanched. 'What? No, I -'

'The threat of it, at least!' Impatient, even angry, the butler spoke as if to an equal - even, perhaps, to an inferior. 'Blast a mountain, sear a valley, set their precious forest ablaze - then do you think Altero won't yield? Come, what else can you do now? Esnic has the girl in his clutches -'

Tonio burst out, ‘I’ll kill him!’

‘Yes in the morning. But back to the Lightship -‘

For a moment, Tonio might have protested again, but all at once he softened, and his tone changed. Stepping towards the butler, he gripped the old man’s shoulders and looked sadly, almost pleadingly into the faded, rheumy eyes.

‘You’ll come with me? Please?’

The butler only shook his head, saying he would slow them down.

‘Besides,’ he added, ‘there’s still work to do here.’

The prince nodded with a dark solemnity, and the two men embraced, briefly but hard.

And then Tonio was gone, contemptuously kicking the inert body of a guard as he rushed away down the corridor. Watching him go, the butler smiled fondly, dabbing a gnarled finger at his gathering tears.

§

‘Peterkin! How do you know?’ said Mazy Grace.

‘Can we trust him?’ hissed Weed. ‘He’s always been a fool.’

‘I wouldn’t trust the Nightdreamer,’ Gubrious moaned. ‘What about that blue box, back in the gravity well?’

‘He’ll be using his powers on us.’ Nora’s voice quavered. ‘There was evil in that box, I’m sure of it.’

‘Shut up, all of you!’ snapped Mazy Grace. The imperious chambermaid was determined that none of her friends should spoil this enchanted evening. They could all just shut up, every one of them.

Still, she could not resist repeating her own question. ‘But Peterkin, how do you know?’

The cobbler’s reply was hardly clear. ‘I was raised on Verd, wasn’t I? My father …

well, he knew all the old stories.’

Dimly, the words floated into the Doctor's mind. He felt the phaser, prodding his back, and his eyes flickered open. Then he goggled, looking this way and that in the silvery, mysterious planetlight.

The scene was like something from a fantastic dream. Trussed up in vines, he floated through the planetlit woods, tugged along by the swimming forms of Mazy Grace, Nora and Weed. Bemused, he saw that the simpering chambermaid, the fat cook and the gangling gardener still wore their silly, but strangely charming costumes of princess, fairy and mouse; likewise, Peterkin still wore his knobbly-headed monster's mask as he swam on ahead, parting their way through the leaves and fronds and vines.

Their little party might have been beneath an ocean, miraculously able to breathe; but if this were an ocean, it was like none the Doctor had encountered in all his extraordinary travels through the vastness of space and time.

The voices continued, dreamy and soft.

'What about your brother?' said Nora. The fat cook appeared to be remembering a story from long ago.

'Brother? He's got no brother,' said Gubrious.

'I had one.' The voice from under the knobbly head was sad. 'A funny little fellow he was too, mischievous as a boy could be, always getting into one scrape or another …

I suppose that's why we lost him, in the end.'

'How can you lose a brother?' said Mazy Grace dismissively. 'He was taken,' said Nora, 'by the Nightdreamer King. That's what you mean, isn't it, Peterkin?' As it happened, it was not the cobbler, but the gardener who spoke next. 'You mean … like the Duchess?' said Weed, alarmed.

Their words were riddles to the Doctor, but right now he did not much care. He cleared his throat, his eyes darting sternly between his strange captors. 'And where do you think you're taking me?' he asked.

Behind him was Gubrious, the dour chaplain, prodding with the phaser. 'The Nightdreamer's awake!'

Gubrious sounded as if this might be grounds for giving the Doctor another blast, there and then. All through their journey through the

low-gravity woods, the chaplain had been struggling, with some difficulty, to tug from his hair a most bothersome strand of ivy. He was scratched, itchy, and in no mood for nonsense.

Peterkin only waved a carefree monster's paw. 'Leave him, leave him. We're nearly there.'

The Doctor said, 'And just where is there?'

'Don't answer,' said Mazy Grace. 'It's one of his riddles.'

'You're the ones with the riddles,' said the Doctor. 'Perhaps you'd like to explain about this Nightdreamer King, whoever he might be?'

Nora said, 'But why does he ask what he knows?'

Weed gibbered, 'His qu-questions could d-drive us mad.'

The Doctor sighed. Despite the phaser, he had little fear of these simple people.

But he was worried about leaving Jo. And the TARDIS.

And worried, very worried, about just how they might escape this strange moon.

'It's true, then, about the Duchess?' Nora was saying.

'She vanished, didn't she?' said Mazy Grace. 'Just like everyone else has vanished.

Long ago, when Lady Ria was still a little girl, it was - not that I can remember, of course,' she added, running a preening hand through the wavy hair that flowed, grey and gold, about her cardboard tiara. 'Ah, but such a lovely lady! And now she sleeps with the Nightdreamers.'

'Not Lady Ria!' said the cook, misunderstanding.

'No, her mother,' said Mazy Grace. 'Really, Nora -'

Peterkin interrupted them. 'We're here - the cave!'

Evidently they had reached another gravity well. Swiftly their weight returned, and they found themselves gathered before a lowering, deep opening in a mossy wall of rock. Against the silvery light the cave appeared dark and mysterious, and a dank, diffuse smell filled the air, not quite unpleasant, but decidedly strange.

The Doctor screwed up his eyes, gazing into the black depths of the cave. Copious bushes and draping, willow-like trees clustered close by the ledge, rustling and shimmering ominously.

Nightdreamer King?

This hardly looked like the dwelling place of a monarch.

'We're close to home,' said Weed, looking up.

'I thought we were coming this way,' said Nora.

The Doctor's curiosity grew. Following the upward gaze of his five captors, he was surprised to see a vast metallic castle, glinting in the planetlight high above the woods, capping the apex of the sheer, rising rocks. Now that looked more like where a monarch might live.

So what, then, is this cave?

'I suppose there's no point in asking,' the Doctor muttered.

There was not. Excitedly, his captors broke into discussion amongst themselves, declaiming about the dreams they hoped would come true, now that the Nightdreamer King must grant their wishes.

Their dreams ranged from the extravagant to the forlorn. Mazy Grace, lowly chambermaid no more, would find herself transformed into a famous actress; Nora the cook would open her own little tavern; Weed the gardener, no more a weed, would have the courage of a lion and the strength of a bear (some debate ensued about whether this was one wish or two); while Peterkin the cobbler said that, of all the wishes in the world, he could wish only for his brother to come back.

As for Gubrious, the sour-faced chaplain would not reveal what he wished for, though Mazy Grace, unable to resist ribbing him, declared that she thought it might have something to do with Nora.

Gubrious flushed scarlet. Nora squealed. There was argument, embarrassment, exclamation. The Doctor, trussed in vines, had just enough freedom to feel inside a pocket of his velvet jacket.

Now, what was this? The sonic screwdriver?

Well, if he could get it close to that phaser …

Mazy Grace snapped, 'Enough of this! So what do we do, Peterkin? Just throw him in?'

Peterkin's confidence, so high before, was now beginning to ebb. Such is often the way, when things we have only dreamed about become suddenly real. 'We-ell, I've never actually caught a Nightdreamer before -'

'Should we call out to the King?' said Weed.

'Tell him our wishes?' quizzed Nora.

Gubrious moaned, 'He'll kill us, I'm sure of it.'

The Doctor gripped the sonic screwdriver. Swivelling round towards the chaplain, that would be the hard part. But not impossible, not if he -

He would not have the chance.

Mazy Grace raised her voice, bellowing into the dark opening. 'Nightdreamer King, we've got one of your children! Do you hear me, Nightdreamer King? Time to make our dreams come true!'

At first there was silence, and Nora giggled. Gubrious sniffed. Green, sinister phosphorescence flickered about the cave-mouth, then was gone again.

Suddenly, there was a fearsome rumbling.

The players stumbled back.

'He's in there,' said Peterkin quaveringly. 'That's him, all right.'

'Wh-what does he look like, Peterkin?' said Weed.

'I … I've never seen him,' was the reply, 'only heard him. Oh, but I think he's got a temper!'

'Listen, couldn't we talk about this? Couldn't we be rational?' The Doctor gave up on the sonic screwdriver. 'Whatever this mythology of yours might be, I don't much rate the chances of your dreams coming true, do you?'

'Don't listen to him,' said Mazy Grace. 'Nightdreamer, into the cave!'

A louder roar echoed from the darkness. Weed whimpered. Peterkin sank down. Only Mazy Grace was fearless, grabbing the phaser and shoving the Doctor forward.

‘Nightdreamer King, receive our offering!’

The Doctor plummeted, deep into blackness.

§

‘Whoa-oh!’

Weightless, Jo careened in the air. She clutched at branches, clawed at leaves.

Despairing, she looked down towards the TARDIS, standing impassively in the silvery darkness, and could only wish she were back inside it.

The trickster Sly was nowhere to be seen.

It was as she tried to swim down again, struggling back to the gravity well, that Jo heard a fearsome rumbling. It came from under the ground. Trees shook. Winds rustled the darkness, and the great planet of Galaxis Bright, hanging in the sky, appeared to shift and shimmer.

The gravity field rippled, seizing Jo once more.

She plunged down, but fresh rumblings shivered through the woods and she recoiled, weightless again - only to collide with a dark figure, swimming out from the trees.

‘Whoa-oh!’ They crashed into the gravity well.

For a moment Jo thought she was passing out again. She could barely breathe.

Blackness filled her eyes. But this was the blackness of hot, pungent leather.

She was pinioned beneath the stranger. Grimacing, Jo struggled to free herself.

‘I don’t suppose anyone ever told you to look where you’re going?’ she demanded, a little unfairly.

Jo gasped as the stranger leapt up. Her new companion was not only dressed all in black, but had few visible features. A visored cap, drawn low, concealed the stranger’s eyes.

And a phaser gleamed in a gloved hand.

‘Get up!’ came the barked command.

‘So much for a friendly welcome.’ Jo clambered to her feet. ‘What’s wrong with everyone here?’

‘Who are you working for? The Darklings?’

‘What?’ Jo gestured to the TARDIS. ‘That’s my spaceship - well, the Doctor’s, actually, and we … I don’t suppose you’ve seen the Doctor, have you?’

Keeping the phaser trained on Jo, the stranger inspected the TARDIS, running curious fingers over the little panelled windows of frosted glass and the panel on the door that declared it, incongruously, to be a police telephone box, free for the use of the public.

‘Our side would never build anything like this,’ the stranger murmured. ‘A Darkship, it has to be.’ The phaser prodded at Jo’s chin. ‘I say, you are a spy, aren’t you?

Tonio told me all about -‘

Jo began, ‘Look, I don’t know what you’re -‘

Threateningly, the stranger edged forward. Jo stumbled back, but it was as she did so that she found herself clanging into something metallic, hidden by bushes and vines. The sound rang through the clearing like a bell.

Just then the stranger cried out, dropping the phaser. But what had prompted this sudden cry was not, Jo realised, the bell-like sound. ‘What is it?’ Jo turned, alarmed. Had Sly come back? It was not Sly. Instead, as if summoned forth by the metallic BONG!,

there had appeared in the clearing a tall woman dressed in flowing, bejewelled robes.

The woman had long, raven-black hair, but a strangely kindly face. Smiling, she moved closer to the dark-garbed stranger, and Jo saw, to her astonishment, that the woman’s feet were not quite touching the ground.

She might have been a vision. A dream.

And Jo’s surprise could only increase as the figure in leathers first sank to the ground as if in reverence, then flung away the concealing

cap - freeing a cascade of raven-black hair, identical to that of the ghostly woman.

‘A girl,’ Jo breathed, ‘in disguise -‘

The girl had no thought for Jo now. Imploringly she reached up to the visionary lady.

‘Mother -‘ she whispered.

But just as the girl would have clutched the jewelled gown, the lady disappeared.

The girl sank down, sobbing. It was as if, for a moment, she had been promised all the bliss that life could deliver; and now, with the lady gone, she had been left to desolation. Her sobs were hard and bitter.

Compassion surged in Jo’s heart, and she tried to comfort this stranger who could not, she was convinced at once, be any sort of enemy.

‘It’s a trick, another cruel trick,’ Jo murmured.

‘Perihelion Night … Nightdreamers -‘ gulped the strange girl.

‘Nightdreamers?’ The word found an echo in Jo’s mind.

A disturbing echo.

Her companion brushed her eyes. She shook her head. ‘I’m Ria,’ she breathed. ‘But you … you’re no spy -‘

‘Of course not.’ Jo held out her hand. ‘I’m Jo. And I think you’d better tell me what’s going on here.’

§

What could be happening?

Swirling colours replaced the blackness. Down, down the Doctor fell, but no longer rapidly. Soon, he hovered in a field of strange gravity.

Green, fizzing radiation surrounded him. Sound boomed massively against the rocky walls. The place in which he had fallen, he saw, was no ordinary cave but a labyrinth of subterranean tunnels, twisting and twining in all directions like the knotty, gnarled branches of an ancient tree.

But then came the phantom. All at once, through the sinister phosphorescence, the Doctor saw a gigantic mouth, roaring as if to tear apart the night. Drawn inexorably towards it, helpless in the vines that bound his limbs, the Doctor felt his mind fill with vivid, terrible visions, visions of a creature so powerful that none could escape its thrall. Serpentine and monstrous, alien and evil, the creature rippled immensely beneath the moon's surface.

'This is illusion! A dream!' the Doctor cried.

But he was not sure if it was.

Gravity surged, crashed. Pinioned against a wall, the Doctor felt the mighty force invade his mind. Faces, places, creatures from his travels flashed all around him, projected outwards by something beyond his control. He fought against the power. But the force was too much for him.

Thrashing in an ecstasy of power, the creature struggled to possess the Doctor, to suck the very energies from his brain.

The Doctor writhed. He cried out. He called on all the mental powers of a Time Lord.

Crackling energies slashed through the vines, and his bonds fell away.

But still the creature would not set him free.

'Creature … I defy you! Nightdreamer King, I defy you!'

The end came quickly. The roaring that filled the air rose to an unbearable pitch, crashing like a thousand crazed orchestras, rising all in unison to a shattering crescendo, and the colours collided into a dazzling flash.

Borne on waves of mental energy, repelled as if by negative gravity, the Doctor whizzed and crashed through the labyrinth, surging back through tunnel after tunnel, cascading ever further away from the fearsome, enraged being.

§

'Nothing's happening yet,' said Weed. Gangling as ever, the gardener struggled to lift a large boulder with his puny, matchstick arms.

'Never mind your strength,' said Nora the cook, 'what about my lovely

tavern?'

'You think it's just going to appear here?' said Mazy Grace, swishing regally in her royal costume. 'Or, should I say, appear here? Really, how foolish! In front of this cave?' Her manner softened, and her eyes shone with longing. 'I told you, my friends, we should all go back to the castle. It may take time, but I think sooner or later we'll find that things Just - well, go our way.'

'That's what you're hoping, isn't it?' said Nora. 'A company of players might land tomorrow, and one of them might discover you while you're doing out his room?' The innuendo lingered on the cook's plump lips. 'Really, Mazy! Might, might, might!'

'Are you being sarcastic, Nora?' said the chambermaid.

'Me, Mazy? Sarcastic?'

'I told you this was a bad idea,' moaned Gubrious. The chaplain had been doing little more than moan for some time. 'It's just not godly, all this wishing nonsense.'

'And when did you say that?' said Weed.

'You didn't have to come,' pointed out Mazy Grace.

'Oh, don't listen to her,' said Nora. 'I'm glad you came, Gubrious. You're a good fellow - not stuck up, like some I could mention.'

Pointedly, she turned away from Mazy Grace.

The chaplain smiled, just a little; then he swallowed hard, peering into the cave-mouth again. No further sounds had come from within, but the silence, out in these dark woods, was every bit as eerie.

'So what is supposed to happen?' said Nora. 'Peterkin? Say, where is Peterkin?'

'Well, I never,' said Mazy Grace, pointing.

Vegetation pressed thickly against the rocky ledge, and the simple cobbler, under a canopy of fronds, had fallen asleep, curled into a ball. Absurdly, he still wore his monster's head.

For a moment his four friends forgot their differences, and gazed upon him fondly.

‘I’m tired too,’ said Weed. ‘Very tired.’

Mazy Grace yawned; so did Gubrious.

‘But wait … who’s this?’ Nora said blearily.

In their sleepy state, the friends barely registered surprise, let alone alarm, as a little green man suddenly appeared before them. Merrily he skipped between them, and the players could only look on, dazed, as he launched into a dance, lights sparkling like cinders on the air behind him.

Strange music surrounded him as he sang:

My name is Sly And I’m sure I Am just too bad to mention: But pity me For cruelty Was never my intention!

The dance was a slow one, not sprightly like before; no crazed caperings, no wild posturings, only a wavy, hypnotic rhythm. And as he danced, Sly swerved balletically towards the players, touching the forehead of each as if in some mysterious, ambiguous benediction.

When he was finished, the players all slept.

The music died away. Sly pirouetted, clapping his hands. He licked his lips. ‘Now, what delightful games can I play? The one with - let’s see, the Atinati weed? Yes, that’s always been one of my favourites …’

From the cave came a rumbling, and Sly cowered.

‘What - now, master?’ he said, disappointed. ‘No time to play? Poor Sly!’

He sighed, and dipping a hand into his pocket, sprinkled green dust over the five sleepers. The bodies trembled in the planetlight, then slowly vanished.

‘Goodbye,’ said Sly. ‘Goodbye, fellow captives.’

§

‘But that’s terrible!’ Jo cried. ‘Your father -‘

‘Sounds like a tyrant? That’s just it.’ Ria grimaced. ‘Once, he would never have been this way. When I was a little girl … When Mother was still with us - why, he loved us so much! He was a good man, kind … Now, he just retreats to his meditation chamber, and when he

appears, it's only to -'

'Shh! Did you hear something?' Jo glanced round, alarmed.

'These woods are full of noises,' said Ria.

'And Nightdreamers? That was your mother?'

'Her image, sent to taunt me …' Ria shuddered. 'Funny, I'd never quite believed it - tales my old nurse used to tell, that's what I thought.' Her voice dropped to a whisper. 'And now I know they were all true.'

Jo would have pressed her new friend to say more, but Ria sprang up.

'Come on, you can help me with the Vorgon ray.'

'What is it, exactly?' Jo asked.

Ria stripped vegetation from the Lightship, revealing a bright curve of hull marked with geometric designs. Looking for the hatch, she flung back absently, 'The ray? Oh, it makes vibrations in metal - sound waves. Now, if I could only attune it to the castle, I could shake it to the ground!'

Jo was aghast. 'You couldn't!'

'The castle's metal. Of course I could.'

'I mean, you wouldn't - your father's castle …'

'I will,' Ria said simply, 'if Tonio's not set free.'

And opening a panel in the Lightship's hull, she scrambled inside.

Jo hung back, troubled. How she wished the Doctor were here! But there was hardly any need to wonder what had happened to him. Jo had been caught up in the Doctor's adventures for too long not to be able to take a good guess. No doubt he had got himself mixed up in this business somehow, and dangerously, too - perhaps, at this very moment, he was in the castle …

If only he were all right! 'Trust the Doctor,' Jo said aloud. 'Oh. I knew we were in serious

trouble - the moment I saw that wretched Sly!'

'What?' Ria's dark head appeared again in the hatchway.

Jo waved her back. 'Nothing, nothing … Well, Just something about Sly, this funny little man dressed all in green -'

'You've seen him?' Ria burst out.

'Well - yes, he was here, and …'

'Jo, you don't know what this means!'

Bewildered, Jo could only agree that she did not. Ria tried to explain.

Scrambling from the Lightship, the leather-clad girl paced anxiously, spilling out an old, confused legend that her nurse had once told her.

Sly, it seemed, or Green Sly, was a special minion of the Nightdreamer King, his particular avatar in the world of the Unsleeping. Casting seeds around him of confusion and chaos, mischief and misery, usually the devilish little sprite kept himself invisible, fading into the green of the woods.

To see him - actually see him - was a portent.

'Of what?' Jo urged.

'We're doomed,' Ria whispered.

'That's nonsense,' said Jo, 'I can't believe -'

In truth, Jo was not sure what she believed. After all, she was the one who had seen Sly. And she was the one who had felt his power. She was about to ask her new friend to tell her more, when suddenly Ria cried out. But the cry, this time, was one of joy. Her face filled with wonderment, Ria pointed into the silvery darkness - and Jo swivelled round to see, swimming gracefully through the sky, a lithe young man with waving blond hair, dressed in a costume of robes and golden bands.

Softly he descended into the gravity well.

At the sight of Ria, the regal young man was astonished - and joyous, too. ‘Tonio!’ She rushed to him. ‘My love, but how -‘ ‘I escaped. The guards -‘

‘And I - oh, but we’re free, free!’ The lovers embraced, forgetting all else.

‘This is like a dream,’ Ria breathed.

Enchanted by the sight of them, for a moment Jo could only enjoy their happiness. A plangent chord sounded in her heart, like music from afar, and she thought what a splendid thing it must be to have such a lover. Again she remembered Latep, the young Thal on Spiridon who had helped defeat the Daleks, and wondered if she should have gone with him after all. But no, it had been only a kind of dream, that was all.

Then Jo felt a chill. Her next words were blundering, abrupt. ‘Ria, you’re sure this isn’t -‘

‘Isn’t what?’ Ria turned to her.

‘A dream. Before, with your mother -‘

‘No, no!’ Laughing, Ria dismissed Jo’s fears. ‘Tonio, this is Jo, a traveller from … She was going to help me with the Vorgon ray, but now … Jo, don’t look so concerned. Tonio’s real, I can feel him in my arms!’

Then what about Sly? Jo wondered.

And there was something else. What about doom?

With a forced smile, she indicated the Lightship. ‘So what now, then? You two are just going to take off in that funny little ship of yours, are you?’

Eagerness shone in Tonio’s eyes, but Ria’s face fell. ‘It’s not that simple. Father -

‘

‘Look!’ Jo pointed to the edge of the clearing. Perihelion Night, as if endowed with its own strange volition, seemed determined to spring on them one surprise after another. And this was a very strange

surprise indeed.

Peering round the trunk of a tree was a most peculiar face, knobbly, orange, and decidedly inhuman.

‘A monster,’ breathed Ria, but her alarm was short-lived, and she laughed as the monster - his body incongruous against his bulbous head - scuttled forward, bowed ineptly, and knelt down before her. Jo and Tonio exchanged glances. ‘Some monster,’ said Tonio. Jo said, ‘It’s obviously only a man in a suit.’ ‘And,’ said Ria, ‘I think I know who he is. Tonio, remember when you broke the strap of your sandal? This is Peterkin the cobbler, I’m sure of it!

Peterkin?’

In reply, the cobbler only gestured to the trees, summoning forth his four companions. In a trice, kneeling beside him, there was a middle-aged princess with a cardboard tiara, a man in a mouse-mask, a plump, simpering fairy, and a miserable-looking fellow in a clerical collar, covered in scraps of prickly ivy.

‘Mazy Grace!’ laughed Ria. ‘Weed … Nora … Gubrious! Tonio, they’ve come to wish us well.’

As if to prove this, the players now rose as one and began to dance, linking hands, cavorting around Ria, Tonio and Jo. Music filled the air, and as they danced they sang:

On Perihelion Night Sweet Perihelion Night Weave a circle in the planetlight That shines so bright above - To bless - bless - bless Your dreams of love!

Like soft, entangling ribbons the song wound around them, filling the clearing with its undulating rhythms. Her eyelids fluttering, Jo felt a deep, abiding of well-being, as if the love she had wished for herself moments earlier, half in envy, half in sadness, had enfolded her already in its warm, intense embrace.

To bless - bless - bless Your dreams of love!

It was enchanting - too enchanting.

Only too late did Jo see the green cinders, sparkling round the feet of the players.

‘Nightdreamers,’ she whispered, ‘they’ve become Nightdreamers -‘

Tauntingly, the song wound on. Already, Ria and Tonio had sunk down in the grass, like curlicues of smoke diminishing, fading, into the embers of a dying fire.

Smiling, they fell into a happy sleep.

Then Jo sank down too …

§

The Doctor swam through blackness.

At last, kicking against a projecting rock, he propelled himself into a vertical shaft, cutting through the labyrinth of underground caves. Up and up he rose in a gravity vacuum, the sinister phosphorescence vanishing behind him.

Now, hands flailing over his head, the Doctor felt an obstruction. It was something made of metal. A trapdoor? A hatch? There were bolts, thick and heavy.

He groped for the sonic screwdriver, applying it to the bolts. In weightless darkness, this was a difficult task. More than once, his cloak got in the way, billowing up around his fumbling hands. When the bolts gave way at last, the Doctor struggled hard to shift the hatch.

But what would he find on the other side?

There was a shimmer, soft and golden like candlelight.

His strength almost gone, the Doctor hoisted himself into a curious chamber, vast but cluttered, like a basement. Indeed, he supposed he was in the very bowels of the castle, a place of old, cracking leather, of mildew and dust. Wonderingly, he looked around him. There were hunched, dim shapes of sofas and chairs; there were chests and boxes; there were curtains and garments draping mustily from the low ceiling. Cobwebs hung from walls made of metal.

And then there were the mannequins.

Moving carefully, the Doctor inspected first one, then another of the many human figures, propped waxily by the walls, eyelids closed like inert, deathly sleepers.

The light was dim, but he saw that some were dressed as servants, some as fine courtiers. There were old men, boys, beautiful women.

What could be the point of these elaborate dolls? Then the Doctor had a chilling thought. In jewel-encrusted finery, spread out on a chaise-longue, lay the languid figure of a beautiful

woman with long, flowing, raven-black hair. The Doctor touched a hand to her cheek.

He felt her wrist. ‘Dead?’ he murmured. ‘Or sleeping?’ Something clattered to the floor. He turned sharply, but the silence

resumed.

A mouse? A rat?

Cautiously the Doctor parted one faded, velvety curtain, then another. Moving past a carved screen, he made for the source of the diffuse, golden light.

The light, pulsing from lanterns in the floor, surrounded an old man in a throne-like chair, perched high upon a rounded dais. The Doctor’s eyes travelled over the flowing beard, the ornate robes. Curiously, he ascended the dais steps, picking up a gnarled, long-nailed hand.

‘Asleep,’ murmured the Doctor. ‘And … dreaming?’

Then what, he wondered, could be the link between this chamber and the mysterious creature he had seen below? From the dais he turned back to survey the many sleepers, dustily propped up or lying amongst the debris.

That was when he saw the five familiar figures, leaning askew against an old chest, like puppets with cut strings or toys against a toybox, left out to languish.

Princess. Fairy. Monster. Mouse.

The one in the clerical collar was there too, a wreath of ivy, like an ironic prize, draped around his neck.

‘But … so soon?’ murmured the Doctor. ‘What could have happened? And how?’

The eyelids of the five players flickered restlessly, as if they were deep in the world of dreams.

Fascinated, the Doctor stood pondering, and in his distraction he did not see when the old man behind him snapped his eyes open - nor

when one of the claw-like hands twitched, then wriggled, its jewel-encrusted fingers flashing in the light.

The Doctor paced across the dais, thinking hard. He tapped his chin. He laced his fingers.

Then came the voice, booming suddenly:

‘Who dares disturb my meditation?’

The Doctor whirled round. He would have sprung back, but already Duke Altero had grabbed him, clutching him with a grip like iron.

The dais rose from the floor.

The Doctor struggled, but his assailant had taken him off guard. And this was no ordinary, weak old man. Inhuman fire blazed in Duke Altero’s eyes. A force beyond human ability possessed his limbs as the low ceiling opened, and the dais emerged, with dizzying swiftness, into the vast, chilly presence chamber above, shimmering with electro-tapers and billowing, ancient tapestries.

Servants cried out. Milling courtiers scurried back, alarmed.

‘Guards!’ cried Duke Altero. ‘Guards!’

The Doctor wrenched free from the iron grip. He leapt down from the dais, sprawled to the iron-flagged floor, scrambled up - but already the dark-garbed guards surrounded him, sinister in their visored caps, phasers at the ready, and all the Doctor could do was raise his hands.

Duke Altero thundered, ‘This stranger has disturbed my meditation! Undoubtedly, he is an agent from Galaxis Bright - a prying, lying lackey of Emperor Exis Umane, bent on discovering the secrets of Verd!’

‘Now look here, old chap -‘ the Doctor began.

He would have no chance to finish. Again the Duke’s voice boomed out, wilder than before, and all around the presence chamber, courtiers and servants sank down in cringing, terrified abasement.

‘Lock him up!’ cried the Duke. ‘Prince Tonio must be at the bottom of this. Why, his treachery is worse than I had believed, worse than I could have imagined. And to think, I would have shown mercy! In the morning, he shall receive his fit and proper punishment - and so shall

this stranger.'

The Duke paused, gazing around him with eyes like searing coals. 'And what punishment? Fools, is there any who asks what punishment, when the only fitting punishment is death - DEATH - DEATH?'

His voice cracked into crazed, high laughter.

Act Three

Electro-tapers flickered against the walls as the guards marched the Doctor away from the presence chamber. Holding his hands above his head, he gazed curiously about the metallic corridors. If only he could find out what was happening here! Grim possibilities crowded his mind, but attempts to quiz his captors met with no success.

He jerked his head towards the ceiling. ‘Galaxis Bright? That’s the big silvery planet in the sky?’

No answer.

The Doctor sighed, and tried again.

‘This Tonio fellow - what’s he done to upset the old chap, then?’

The guards remained implacable.

‘The secrets of Verd?’ said the Doctor. ‘I’d guess there’d be quite a few of those, wouldn’t you?’

No response. Of course.

‘Talkative fellows, aren’t you? Are you always like this, or is it just me?’

The Doctor hunched his shoulders, resigned.

Then, all at once, he lashed out. ‘Hai!’

The guards collapsed, phasers clattering to the ground, as the Doctor skidded away, rushing down the dimly lit corridors. Curses and scramblings echoed behind him.

Phasers blasted, searing against the walls.

The Doctor ducked. Darted.

Another corridor. And another.

Down a staircase. More stairs, more.

On and on the Doctor crashed and clattered, desperate to make his escape, but the guards were coming fast, their heavy boots echoing against the cold floors.

The Doctor glanced back. They were closing in on him.

He skidded round a corner.

And that was when, all at once, the Doctor felt an urgent hand clutch at his sleeve, and turned to see a bespectacled, wild-haired old man, gazing at him with eager eyes.

The old man's words came quickly.

'This way! This way!'

A door whirled shut behind them.

§

'Excellent!'

Clapping his hands, laughing merrily, Sly pirouetted between the sleepers in the clearing. The players had vanished, and now there were only Jo, Ria and Tonio, slumbering like infants in the leaves and long grass.

The little man peered into each face in turn. 'Such a prize! And such a one - and such! You'll be pleased with these, won't you, Majesty? Oh, you must - but first, some sport with them … after all, I'm sure their minds are stronger than the minds of mere players. Won't they need to be addled just a little, if they are to dream with the Nightdreamer King?' Skipping to the edge of the clearing, Sly plucked a certain little flower. 'The Atinati weed,' he murmured. 'The sweet, blessed Atinati weed!' Holding it up in the planetlight, he turned it admiringly, and sang this ditty:

Mortal fools ignore such flowers, Little dreaming of their powers! Dreaming? Ah, but that's to come When this flower strikes reason dumb! Reason? No, there's none in love - When planetlight shines bright above!

Pleased with his rhyme, Sly applauded himself, did a little dance, and fluttered back to the sleepers, squeezing the sticky juice from the centre of the flower first over Tonio's eyelids, then Ria's.

Deliberating, he crouched beside Jo. Should he squeeze the flower again?

He spoke aloud once more. ‘No need - no, this Tonio, I predict, will be first to awake. And when he awakes, he’ll love the first living thing he sees … Dear me,’

Sly giggled, ‘I suppose I’d better be careful!’

And he scampered into the undergrowth, just as Tonio sprang up, surprised.

The Prince rubbed his eyes. ‘Wh-what happened?’

Sly sniggered, clapped his hands - and Jo sprang up too.

The effect on Tonio was remarkable. Gasping, whimpering a little, he staggered towards her, hesitating, uncertainly, some paces away. He swept back his long blond hair. His eyes grew wide and brimmed with tears.

‘Jo,’ he breathed, ‘but … you’re beautiful!’

‘What?’ Jo backed away.

Now the Prince came forward again, arms flung out.

‘Oh, why didn’t I see it before?’ He struck the side of his head, his golden wristband clanging against the band that circled his brow. ‘Jo, I must have been blind, mad, deluded! It’s as if I see clearly for the first time - as if all my old life were … just a dream, and now … Jo, don’t play games! Jo, I - I love you -‘

A passionate stirring filled Jo’s heart. For a moment she might have swooned, even fallen into Tonio’s arms, wholly incapable of resisting him. At once she stopped herself.

No, this was insane! No, this was wrong!

‘This … This is ridiculous!’ Jo protested. ‘Tonio, you love Ria -‘

He only laughed. ‘Ria? Who’s Ria?’

It was then that Ria rose.

‘Tonio?’ Temporarily, she was blinded by sleep. ‘Tonio, my love, where are you?’

‘Dear me,’ muttered Sly to himself, ‘I think there might be tears on the way! Well, a catfight - but could I be so cruel? Good old, green old Sly?

No, never!’

He snapped his fingers - and Peterkin, in his monster’s guise, appeared again, just as Ria dashed the sleep from her eyes. She looked at him, confused - then, in a flash, her confusion was gone.

‘My love!’ Ria cried, and ran to him.

§

‘A stranger, you say? What sort of stranger?’

‘Tall. White-haired. Velvet cloak.’

‘Really? Extraordinary.’

‘You’ve seen him?’

‘No - no one.’ The butler stepped away from the open door, indicating his cramped quarters, a place of finicky ornaments, tasselled lampshades, faded etchings and old magazines stacked in heaps. Floral wallpaper covered the walls, stuck between the metallic ribs, and a shabby, overstuffed sofa squatted atop a brownish, swirling-patterned carpet.

Impatiently, the eyes of the guards swept over this unprepossessing chamber.

One said, exasperated, ‘The old fool knows nothing.’

‘You’re right,’ said the other, after a moment, ‘we’re wasting time.’

‘Sure you won’t look round?’ The butler’s back was bent and his head wobbled. ‘He might have slipped by me, this stranger of yours.’

One guard snorted. The other rolled his eyes. Contemptuously, they turned and left -

and the butler, straightening his back, swiftly pressed the door-control. He had spoken to the guards in a senile, high-pitched whine. Now his voice was deeper, firmer.

‘It’s all right, you can come out now.’

‘That was a risk, wasn’t it?’ said the Doctor, emerging from behind the sofa. He held out his hand. ‘I owe you some thanks. I’m the Doctor.’

‘And I’m the butler. But come into my pantry while I make some tea - you can’t tell me you don’t need a cup of tea after that.’

Parting a curtain, the old fellow led the way into a dingy, corridor-like space stuffed with jars, bottles and boxes. Shadowy items of kitchen equipment, hunched or jagged, stood on a much-stained, knife-scored bench. Leaning against a wall was a shiny tray, partially concealed by a chequered dish-towel.

‘Tea, tea … Where’s the tea?’ Pottering around the pantry, the butler resumed something of his earlier, doddering manner. Every so often he would smooth his wild hair, or push his spectacles further up his nose. ‘Dear me, what a night! Perihelion Night, that’s always trouble for a start. And Lady Ria, defying her father -‘

‘Duke Altero - he’s her father?’

‘You mean you really don’t know?’

The Doctor was confused. Was the butler having doubts about helping a stranger? In moments, his manner had changed, and changed again.

And why, in any case, was this old fellow helping him?

He clutched the butler’s arm. ‘I’m a traveller,’ he said reassuringly. ‘I’m no agent from Galaxis Bright.’

‘Oh, I’m sure of that.’ His eyes narrowing, the butler peered intently into the Doctor’s face. ‘Indeed, I think there must be much you do not know. But tell me -

surely you know this is an evil moon?’

‘Evil? What do you mean?’

The butler sighed, as if from long weariness. ‘Who would have thought it, when Altero fled here? Who would have thought this sanctuary could be a prison?’

‘He fled here?’ said the Doctor. ‘But why?’

‘It was long ago,’ came the reply, ‘after his quarrel with Emperor Exis Umane. They had been such friends from boyhood, too - why, Altero had even married the Emperor’s beautiful sister …’

For a moment, the butler was lost in reverie. Then he shook his head. ‘But what’s that? What made them quarrel? Why, it was The Awakening, when Galaxis Bright, after long isolation, opened up to trade with its sinister sister planet, Galaxis Dark.

Altero warned that our civilisation would be ruined, that the Darklings would plunder us, exploit us - but the Emperor refused to listen. Always a one for science, progress, reason, was Emperor Exis Umane - something of a scientist himself, indeed … But of course, you’d know nothing of all this, Doctor - would you?’

The Doctor frowned, troubled. Where could all this be leading? Curiously he peered about him at the kitchen equipment, at the tray that gleamed behind its concealing dish-towel.

There was something strange about this pantry.

And about this butler, too …

‘Alas,’ the old fellow went on, ‘Altero was right. Ah, the Darklings are subtle in their imperial sway - for yes, theirs is an empire in all but name. If we do not sell, they take - their prices, in any case, are a kind of taking. And now they know about the gravity rocks … Ah, Doctor, think of such evil, spreading across the trade routes of the galaxy!’

‘I’ll think about it,’ said the Doctor, ‘if you explain to me what you mean. But first, I think, you should tell me who you really are.

The butler smiled. ‘What’s that, Doctor?’

‘May I ask, have you been in service here for long?’

‘You’d think so, wouldn’t you? But the old butler died. These quarters were his -

I’ve just taken them over. I came from the homeworld only a short time ago - oh, quite a short time.’

‘Yes, that makes sense.’ The Doctor’s tone was ominous. Suddenly, like a conjuror, he pulled the chequered dish-towel from the tray.

It was no ordinary tray.

‘A visiscreen,’ said the Doctor. ‘And connected, I see, to the Duke’s presence chamber.’

Next, the Doctor indicated something that looked like a kettle, then

what might have been a vegetable basket, and a box of wafers.

‘A portable electron microscope, I believe. And what’s this? Rock samples, ready for analysis? Scientific slides? Quite a laboratory you’ve got here - for a butler.’

The pretend butler should perhaps have been alarmed. Instead, he only smiled, his old eyes twinkling behind his little glinting spectacles.

‘Very good, Doctor! Very good, indeed!’

And with that, he threw back his head, laughed heartily, and announced that he was really Munex Axis, a scientist from the court of Galaxis Bright, and close confidante of the Emperor. Under pressure from the Darklings, he went on, Emperor Exis Umane had sent him to study the gravity rocks that were found only on Verd, lining the gravity wells.

‘Gravity rocks, hm?’ said the Doctor, picking up a small, jagged rock sample from the vegetable basket.

Munex nodded. ‘A source of artificial gravity - natural, cheap, abundant. Imagine if it could be synthesised … Why, the value could be incalculable - to the Darklings.’

Emperor Exis Umane, Munex explained, had no desire to invade his old friend’s realm.

While Tonio tried to win round Duke Altero, Munex was to have planned mining operations - but nothing had gone according to plan.

‘What a fool I’ve been!’ said the old man. ‘How could I have believed we could mine this rock? No good has ever come of it, nothing but evil, madness! And Altero thought that he could live here and ignore it - how, I ask, when it gives this moon what gravity it possesses?’

Fascinated, the Doctor pondered these words. But how much, really, did Munex know?

The Doctor wondered if he should mention the creature in the cave - and what his new friend would say if he did.

‘This gravity,’ the Doctor ventured, ‘I get the feeling it’s not always efficient…’

‘You speak of the gravity decay, Doctor. Ah, it has broken out all over Verd. Some fear the gravity might evaporate altogether, stripping this moon of its atmosphere, its vegetation, of all possibility of supporting life.’

Thoughtfully, the Doctor stroked his chin. Well, there was nothing to lose. ‘So tell me, how do the Nightdreamers fit in with all this?’

Quite what response he expected, he was by no means sure. As it happened, Munex only looked puzzled, then irritated, as if the Doctor were joking with him. ‘You speak of folklore - legend. Doctor, I’m speaking of scientific fact!’

‘Quite, quite.’ The Doctor studied the rock sample, turning it in his hand. ‘I suppose you’ve looked at this under the electron microscope?’

‘I’ve tried - can’t say I’ve learned much.’

‘Do you mind?’ Slipping the sample under the kettle-like apparatus, the Doctor punched a keypad, concealed under the spout.

He shook his head. No good.

‘Trans-dimensional, I’d say. Hm …’ An idea dawned in the Doctor’s mind. ‘Listen, old chap, I don’t suppose you can show me a way out of here - one that wouldn’t mean going past those guards?’

‘There’s the servo-shaft …’ Munex peered into the visiscreen tray, using one of the handles to flip from camera to camera. ‘Yes, it’s clear. But Doctor, what do you want to do?’

‘I’ve a theory about all this.’ The Doctor slipped the rock sample into his Jacket.

‘But I’ll need to get back to the TARDIS and its data banks, if I’m going to -‘

‘The what?’ said Munex.

There was no time to explain. In moments, the Doctor had vanished into the servo-shaft, thanking his strange new friend for all his help.

The old fellow only looked perplexed - but when he was alone, his manner changed again. Looking round suspiciously, he drew back into a corner of the pantry, raised a hand to his mouth, and spoke into a

gleaming ring on his hand.

‘Esnic, are you there? This Doctor - he’s a Darkling, all right. But what a ridiculous disguise - velvet and lace, I ask you! What does he think he is, a fine courtier? Why, if I ever had such a fop in my court, I’d throw him out on his ear at once. Absurd fellow … But he wants the gravity rocks, that much is clear. Pursue him, Esnic.’

A voice crackled from the ring. ‘And … destroy him, Your Imperial Highness?’

The old man’s eyes gleamed.

§

‘Curse it.’

Esnic snapped off his communicator. Several messages about this Doctor had come while the chief of guards, his head still throbbing from the stun-ray, had groped, half-undressed, back to his quarters. He had hoped he could ignore the matter. Right now, he had other things on his mind.

Or rather, one thing - finding Ria.

But there were more things to consider. Swiftly, Esnic donned a fresh uniform, adjusting his sleek leathers with sharp, angry gestures. He supposed he had to obey the so-called butler - after all, he could not be sure, just yet, that he did not still need him. But soon, soon … The butler (butler, indeed!) thought that Esnic was his own agent, his own plant.

The old fool had never guessed the truth …

The chief of guards felt a surge of confidence. This night, and all its follies, would be over soon enough. Fondly he thought of his marriage, and the bliss to come -

for Ria would not escape him, of that much he was sure. What an ornament she would make … to the court of Galaxis Dark!

Esnic smiled, and drew his visor over his eyes.

§

‘Well, here goes -‘

Diving from the battlements, the Doctor scrambled at the air with his hands and scraped a tall tree. Kicking against a castle wall, he rose just in time, soaring above the woods.

With long strokes he swam, his cloak rippling behind him like a pennant.

Swimming in the air, the Doctor reflected, might be easy for those who had done it for years. It was not so easy for beginners. As he flailed on through the night sky, he only hoped he could get back to the TARDIS.

Above him, the great silvery ball of Galaxis Bright loomed alarmingly close.

But something else was closer.

Peering earnestly into the dark woodland, the Doctor failed to see a panel sliding in the metallic side of the castle, and the sinister figure that was revealed there, mounted on a shiny-fendered rocketbike.

Esnic gunned the engine, swooping into the night.

'What the -' The Doctor turned, startled.

Flashing sharply in the planetlight, the rocketbike and its leather-garbed rider bore down on him like a hungry beast. Flames and churning smoke billowed behind it, and mounted between the handlebars like a jutting, evil snout was a large and menacing superphaser.

Esnic fired it. Rays zapped out.

Desperately, the Doctor floundered in the air as Esnic tore towards him.

Fresh rays fizzed out, narrowly missing him.

The Doctor lunged, vanishing into the trees. Clutching at branches, he propelled himself down through the weightless woods. Leaves and vines waved weirdly around him.

Flowers crumbled at his flailing touch, their petals floating upwards like thick, fragrant smoke. Strange birds flurried. Dappled planetlight flickered and flashed.

And then there were the crashings through the leaves behind.

It was Esnic, coming fast. Rays burst again, violently fluorescing in the silvery darkness.

The Doctor hid in the undergrowth, gripping at ferns. The woods were deep and dark and vast. His prospects of escape were good, they had to be. If only he could hold still. If only he could hide himself while Esnic went by.

The rocketbike whizzed past. Esnic cursed, turning. He slowed down. Its engine murmuring, the rocketbike edged its way - slower, slower - towards the Doctor. The harsh voice of the chief of guards rang out through the trees.

‘You can’t escape me, spy - I know you’re here!’

The Doctor barely breathed. Gripping the ferns tighter, he struggled not to fly up into the air. His cloak fluttered dangerously. The rays had singed it, and a smell of burning, thin but distinct, wafted up from the undergrowth.

Esnic sniffed the air.

By now, the rocketbike was barely crawling, and the Doctor wondered if he could rise up suddenly, knocking the rider away - when the precarious ferns ripped from the ground and the Doctor, with a cry, hurtled into the air.

The rocketbike spun round.

Esnic shouted.

He fired.

The Doctor grabbed a branch, swinging up just in time to avoid the searing ray.

Rapidly, he hurled himself upwards, crashing through the foliage, the leaves and coniferous needles and pungent berries and petals cascading all around him, a wild silvery whirl in the eerie planetlight.

Suddenly, prospects of escape were remote.

Esnic was after him.

It was hopeless.

But not quite - just as he was about to spin up beyond the woods, the

Doctor grabbed a tree trunk. For a crucial instant he was concealed, lost to view in the overhanging branches while Esnic, confused again, turned the bike in the air.

The Doctor had one chance. One chance only.

He swung out, leaping on to the bike.

Startled, Esnic fired the superphaser again, but the rays shot uselessly into the undergrowth. Crying out, he grabbed for the holster on his hip, flourishing his own phaser like a silver dagger.

The Doctor knocked it flying.

The two men grappled.

Out of control, the rocketbike spun, surged, spiralled.

Twice, the Doctor nearly fell.

Esnic clutched the Doctor's throat.

Backwards, backwards hurtled the rocketbike, whirling inexorably towards the implacable walls of the mighty iron castle. Battlements loomed like monstrous, jagged teeth. 'Look out!' The Doctor's voice was a strangled gasp. Esnic turned. It was too late.

Lashing out, the Doctor sent his opponent hurtling through the air. With a cry, Esnic thudded into a tall tower - then thumped down on the battlements, spent, like an enormous, black, leathery insect.

The Doctor just had time to take control of the rocketbike. Letting out the throttle, he soared away.

§

'Jo! Jo, come back -' Striding towards the TARDIS, Jo turned sharply. 'I've told you, I've had enough of -' Tonio caught her hand. 'Marry me, Jo. I know you feel the same way -'

'What? First Ria, now me -'

He sank to one knee. 'Jo, it's Perihelion Night! You wouldn't sulk in a

cramped old spaceship, would you, when you could be out in this enchanted wood - with me?'

'Cramped? Actually, it's bigger on the -'

'How beautiful you are in the planetlight!' Tonio looked up imploringly, the golden band at his forehead flashing. 'Why, I can see it in your eyes, Jo - we were meant for each other, you know we were.'

Against her will, Jo softened. There was no doubt about it - Tonio was charming.

Too charming!

'What am I thinking?' She broke away, and would have plunged into the TARDIS - if Tonio, with a teasing laugh, had not reeled in front of her, blocking the door. 'Quite the little moon-shrew, aren't you?' he grinned. 'But I'll tame you, soon enough! It's destiny, Jo -' 'It's a trick!' Jo snapped her fingers in Tonio's face. 'Ria! Think of Ria!' 'What's Ria to me?'

It was a fair point. On the other side of the clearing, humming and smiling, Tonio's beloved sat with Peterkin the cobbler, his masked head in her lap. Marvelling, as if it were silk or the softest fur, she stroked the lumpy papier-mâché.

'Darling monster, sweet monster -' Jo slumped down. 'Oh, this is madness! Talk about a comedy of errors-' The lovestruck Tonio, marvelling at her beauty, only leaned against the side of the TARDIS, sighed, and slithered to the ground. Jo shook her head. There was a sparkle of green, a jingling bell, and Sly was before her.

'So sad, my dear - after all this sport I've made?'

'Sport?' Jo bristled. 'What have you done to them?'

She leapt up, chasing the little sprite. Joyously, he capered round the clearing.

Jingle-jangle! Jingle-jangle!

He leapt into a tree.

'Addled, all right!' he cried from on high, plucking the glittering flower from his buttonhole. He twirled it in his fingers. Triumphantly,

he sniffed its perfume. ‘My master will be in ecstasies - addled, everyone addled, and only the Atinati weed can put all to rights!’

‘Come down!’ Jo demanded. ‘Release them!’

Laughing, Sly slipped the flower into his buttonhole again. ‘Oh, I don’t think I’ll do that, do you? What, me?’

Jo gestured at the lovers. ‘Yes! Now!’

Sly’s voice turned bitter. ‘And why shouldn’t these fools be enslaved - answer me that?’

‘It’s wicked,’ Jo said. ‘It’s wrong.’

And it’s too tempting for me.

Yes, that was the truth, wasn’t it? Jo could barely admit it to herself, but again and again she had longed only to throw herself into Tonio’s arms, forgetting Ria, forgetting the danger they were all in, forgetting everything. And only now did she acknowledge, in her heart, just how much she had been tempted to leave the Doctor for a new life with Latep, at the end of their adventure on Spirldon. Oh, perhaps Latep had not been the right man. But Jo knew she wanted love. And secretly, a part of her loved Sly’s magic, and only wanted it to go on and on. Her words of protest were empty.

Besides, they were useless.

But not quite.

‘Wrong?’ Sly’s voice returned like a slow echo. Confused, the little sprite floated back to the ground. For a moment he appeared to be magical no longer, just a troubled, confused boy. ‘You’re right,’ he said sadly. ‘And yet who am I, but the slave of my master? Oh, how I long to be free again!’

‘Poor Sly …’

Whether he were really repentant, Jo could not be sure. But she could be a trickster too. She had to keep him talking - just keep him talking, then snatch that flower.

Jo was herself again. A new, steely resolve filled her heart. Yes, she told herself, she could conquer her temptations. Yes, she could destroy Sly’s magic. She must!

‘Your master?’ she prompted.

The little man was trembling. He sank down, covering his eyes. ‘The Nightdreamer King!’

Now Jo could have darted forward, overpowering him.

She was not to have the chance. Instead, there was a mighty rumbling. The ground trembled, and a swirl of visionary colour welled up all around them, as if called forth by Sly’s cowering words.

The little man was terrified. ‘Majesty! M-Majesty -‘

‘What’s happening?’ Jo cried.

‘Alas, our revels in this sweet night air are ended … His power’s depleting … No more games - he wants us now!’

At once, Jo felt pure fear. In an instant, the visionary colours were a hurricane of light, a relentless churning vortex, consuming the clearing in a ferocious storm.

Just in time she scrambled back, avoiding its clutching wildness.

Sly was not so lucky. Shrieking, the little man was swept up, spiralling round and round in the mighty field of force.

‘All, Majesty - all?’ he cried, in an echoing, distorted voice. ‘An end of Sly? Even Sly? Poor, poor Sly!’

What he meant, Jo could not say. She knew only that he was reaching out to her desperately. She struggled to grab his little hand, but the winds forced her back.

It was no good. Sly vanished into a green, starry cascade, but on and on the flashing colours whirled, faster and faster. Round the edges of the clearing, trees whipped wildly. Some hurtled through the air, ripped up by the roots. The lovers sprawled. Still the ground shook and shivered, boomed and bucked, as if it were about to burst apart.

And now a phantom creature surged into the night. Filling the sky like a vision of doom, it was a gigantic scaly serpent, roaring deafeningly through ravening fangs.

Down it swooped - and down.

It’s not real, Jo told herself. It’s a vision. A dream.

But this was a dream that threatened to kill. Jo and her companions - and the TARDIS, too - whooshed up from the ground like leaves in a wind.

It's in my mind. It's sucking at my mind -

Jo span in the air. She clutched at her head. Dazzled, her eyes took in the silvery immensity of Galaxis Bright, the tortured woodlands, the TARDIS, the lovers, the Peterkin monster - and suddenly, a rocketbike hurtling through the air.

'Doctor!' Jo cried.

Her eyes widened and she exclaimed in joy as she saw the familiar, silver-haired rider, his cloak billowing wildly behind him.

He called above the chaos, 'Jump on, Jo!'

The rocketbike swooped down. Jo gritted her teeth. With the courage of desperation she sprang, cat-like, leaping on behind the Doctor.

'But the others! Doctor, they're -'

Against his will, the Doctor swerved, careering towards the monstrous phantom. At once they were caught up in its hideous thrall, swirling round inside it.

Crazed flashings filled the air.

'It's not real,' Jo burst out, 'it's not real, it's -'

'No!' The Doctor's cry was louder. 'No, I won't let you -'

For moments, all was crashing, crazed wildness, as if the night itself would be torn asunder, rent by the violence of the psychic storm.

But it was not to last. The Doctor screamed, a strange, high-pitched scream like the tolling of a bell, indefinitely prolonged. Flashings like a thousand rapid bursts of lightning filled the air, and the noise rose to a crescendo.

Then, without warning, the noise and the lights and the churning storm were gone, and the rocketbike descended to the clearing, where all was as it had been before.

Or almost. Tonio leaned against the TARDIS, dreaming of Jo. Peterkin slept in Ria's arms. But Sly was gone. And here was the Doctor,

collapsed across the handlebars. Jo shook him. ‘Doctor … Doctor, are you all right? Really, you’re covered with leaves and twigs. Why, you look like -‘

The Doctor turned to her. ‘I’ll tell you one thing, Jo - I might not survive a third attack.’

‘A third? You mean you’ve seen that thing before?’

Jo’s heart thudded hard. Distractedly, she brushed down the Doctor’s clothes, but he barely noticed. Hopping off the rocketbike, he paused only to pat it fondly, looked wryly at the lovers, and reached into a pocket for a small, dark rock.

‘I wonder … I wonder.’ He strode towards the TARDIS.

‘That monster,’ Jo continued, ‘it’s a dream, isn’t it? A vision?’

The Doctor turned sharply. ‘No, Jo - it’s real. And next time, I think we’ll see just how real.’

§

‘Where … where am I?’

Slowly, Esnic raised his head. He was lying sprawled on a cold, grilled floor. Above him was the sky, with the great disc of Galaxis Bright dazzlingly, almost alarmingly close.

Ah yes. He was up on the battlements. The chief of guards moaned, remembering everything.

Esnic had not, he supposed, had the best of evenings, and ruefully he wondered if it could get any worse. For now, it hardly seemed likely - the Doctor lost, Ria lost, this terrible aching in his head … Hauling himself to his feet, he was thankful that at least he had broken no bones.

A strange humming came from below.

Puzzled, Esnic went to the side of the tower, looking down through the zig-zagging, teeth-like battlements. Perhaps it was just his aching head, but something looked awry. What was this stirring, this rippling in the woods? What were these greenish, strange lights, hovering like outriders of a distant storm?

Then there was the sound again, not just from the woods but from the

castle - a low, mantra-like thrumming, drumming, emanating from the metallic walls.

Esnic would never have admitted it to himself, but he was frightened. He turned, uncertain - just as green light burst all around him.

He cried out, doubling over, but his ordeal, as it happened, was not to last for long. Soon enough, the lights subsided; but when, once again, Esnic stood upright, a green, residual glow burnt in his eyes.

'Majesty,' he murmured. 'Majesty, I hear you.'

§

'Jo, can't you shut him up?'

Annoyed, the Doctor turned from the computer.

Jo pursed her lips. Hadn't she tried - and tried, and tried - to make Tonio stop these sighings, these languishings? Why, she had tried even when she hadn't wanted to try!

And this was all the thanks she got. Typical.

'Well, at least he's not chasing me round the console any more.'

'No,' said the Doctor, 'but I could do without that music. Where did he find that -

that flute, anyway?'

'It's a recorder. I don't know, it was here in the TARDIS - wasn't it?'

Enraptured, Tonio trilled his serenades. Ria, with her monster-headed beloved, was quieter, but Jo found them equally exasperating. She supposed they could hardly have left the lovers out in the gravity well - but she rather wished they had. What a trial they had been!

Shaking her head, Jo watched as Ria counted the monster's stubby fingers, murmuring a silly rhyme. 'What are we going to do about them?' said Jo. 'We can't leave them like this, and Sly -' Grimly, the Doctor held up the rock sample. 'Right now, Jo, that's the least of our problems.' 'Oh, thank you! You mess about with your silly old rock, while I -'

'Silly old rock?' The Doctor turned sharply. 'My dear girl, do you realise what this is? I've had my suspicions, but I couldn't be sure - not

without the TARDIS and its memory banks …'

'Doctor, what are you talking about?'

'This isn't rock, Jo. It's shed skin, or a flake of it.'

For a moment, Jo could not imagine what this meant. Then she did.

She gulped. 'Skin? You mean … from that thing we saw outside?'

'That was just a dream-vision - a projection,' said the Doctor. 'The real thing lives inside this moon.'

Jo's eyes widened. 'The Nightdreamer King?'

'Actually, Jo, it's a Norebo Worm.'

'A what?' said Jo.

'A vast, trans-dimensional, spaceborne creature that feeds on psychic energy. I thought they were just myth, legend …' The Doctor paced, troubled. 'That explains what's happening here, don't you see? The psychic manifestations - the people taken, turned into Nightdreamers

- kept like batteries for the Norebo Worm. And the gravity -' Now Jo was confused.

'The gravity? What's that got to do with it?'

'Quite a lot, unless I'm much mistaken. The Worm creates its own gravity. That's what lets it survive in the airless void of space - and draws its prey towards it.'

'Then that's what captured the TARDIS? And that's what keeps us here?'

The Doctor nodded.

Jo began, 'But this Worm -'

'Isn't in space? Exactly.' The Doctor's eyes glittered.

Jo looked thoughtful. 'So that's how this moon has such strange gravity. But why is it so strange? Why isn't it even?'

'Now that's what I don't quite understand,' said the Doctor. 'Even the memory banks can't help us much - there's so little known about these

creatures … Oh, do shut up, there's a good chap!'

Tonio looked up, startled, as the Doctor snatched the recorder out of his hands.

Affronted, the young prince snatched it back.

'Well, really -' The Doctor snatched it again.

This might have gone on for some moments more, but just then Jo pointed anxiously to the scanner. 'Doctor - look!'

They had forgotten to check what was happening outside. While the Doctor analysed the rock sample, the scanner had shown only an empty clearing, ghostly in the planetlight. Now, the clearing was still empty - but leaves fell rapidly from the branches, trees crumbled and died, and

fallen logs floated off into the air.

'The woods,' said Jo, 'they're dying!'

'The gravity decay - of course!' The Doctor struck his forehead. Reeling round, he thrust the recorder into Tonio's hands again. 'Prince, you and your two friends can stay here. Jo, come with me.'

'But Doctor, what's -'

The Doctor turned sharply, his face grim. 'Jo, everyone on this moon is in deadly danger. We've got to get back to the castle - and save them!'

Bewildered, Jo could only follow as the Doctor rushed from the TARDIS. They struggled back to the rocketbike, half-leaping, half-swimming through the fractured gravity.

Lunging, the Doctor grabbed the machine, just as it was about to spiral up into the air.

'Jump on, Jo - and hang on tight!' 'Doctor, you're not making sense,' Jo protested, shouting over the rocketbike, as they revved away from the clearing.

'The creature's wounded - dying!' the Doctor shouted back. 'That must be why it's hiding out here. Twice, it has tried to take over my mind - it's desperate for energy, more and more to keep itself alive. Before it dies, I'll wager it consumes every mind here. We've got to get

everyone off this moon - and fast!'

'But Ria's father - will he listen?' Jo cried. The Doctor's reply was ominous.

'He's controlled by the Norebo Worm - completely in its power!' Blazing fire, the rocketbike whizzed into the night.

‘Doctor! What’s happening?’

Jo could barely bring herself to look. Tightly she clung to the Doctor’s back as the rocketbike hurtled onwards, ducking and diving through the whirling debris. There were logs, leaves, dying birds and animals; all around them the woods were dying, garishly, grotesquely in the shadowy radiance.

And now, as the castle loomed ahead, a visionary chaos surrounded them too. Like silvery ghosts came faces - women, men, young, old, streaming together; there were mighty battles, ceremonies, elaborate feasts; there were children playing; there were animals and androids and myriad strange creatures.

‘It’s the life of the castle,’ the Doctor cried. ‘All the memories from Duke Altero’s people, sucked from their minds by the Norebo Worm -‘

‘You mean - it’s killed them?’ said Jo.

‘Nothing so simple - it’s feeding on their dreams!’

The battlements were before them, jagged against the silvery disc of planetlight.

‘Landing might be tricky - hang on, Jo!’

‘What do you think I’m doing?’

Severed branches flew dangerously past. Swerving, the Doctor almost crashed into a jutting metal wall. There was a screech, and the rocketbike scraped against a flagpole, then flew back, buffeted by the gravity decay.

‘Doctor, we can’t land - the gravity’s all gone!’

‘No, but - see that servo-shaft? It’s open!’

‘What? Doctor … Doctor, no!’

And Jo could only shut her eyes as the rocketbike plunged down through the dark shaft, juddering down and down into the interior of the castle. Perilously, the charging vehicle clanged against the walls,

or screeched excruciatingly, scraping like fingernails on a chalkboard, amplified to a deafening volume. Flames and smoke roared behind them. Jo's eyes watered and she coughed, almost choking She gasped, 'Doctor, when do we stop?'

The Doctor's eyes widened. Quite where this shaft ended, he could not be sure.

Ahead, there was only blackness.

But then there was light - off to the side.

'Jo, jump!'

'What, again?'

There was no time to argue. The Doctor wrenched round. Grabbing Jo, he leapt free, tumbling out into a lighted corridor. From below, the screechings of the rocketbike continued - but not for long.

There was a crash, and a ball of flame roared up the shaft.

'A pity.' The Doctor scrambled to his feet. 'I was growing fond of that contraption.' 'I … I think I can live without it,' Jo muttered, wiping her eyes, waving away the lingering smoke. 'Oh? And how are we going to get back to the TARDIS?' 'Point taken.' Miserably, Jo looked around the dimly lit corridor, mysterious in the shimmerings of the electro-tapers. 'But Doctor, wait - how come there's still gravity here? I thought we'd be flying round all over the place.' It was a good question, but the answer was clear. The Doctor went to a monitor on the wall.

'They've turned on the artificial gravity, that's why. This is no ordinary castle, Jo.' With a knowing look he indicated the metallic ribbing above them; then he gestured to a spiral door, and the code-lock beside it. 'No, I recognised some of these fittings when I first came through here. This, I believe, is what is known among colonists in this quadrant of the galaxy as a sanctum ship.'

'A what?' said Jo. 'You don't mean the castle's a spaceship?'

'Well done, Jo. Actually, just this upper section,' said the Doctor, 'where the Duke lives. The old fellow was no fool - when he was in his right mind, that is. If an invader came, he was prepared. He always knew he might have to leave this moon - and quickly.'

‘Then he could take off now? I mean, we could?’

‘That’s what we’ve got to find out. Come on, Jo, we’re looking for the butler.’ ‘The butler?’ Jo followed the Doctor down the gloomy corridor. At first, it seemed deserted. But it was not.

When they saw the first of the guards, the Doctor reached out a warning hand; Jo restrained a gasp, but there was no need to worry. The guard slept at his post, and when the Doctor touched him, sending his phaser clattering to the floor, the fellow did not even stir. He might have been a mannequin, garbed in black leather.

The Doctor picked up the phaser. ‘Now, which way?’

They moved on, footsteps echoing ominously.

Soon there was another sleeping guard, then another. Through open doors they glimpsed castle servants, then fine courtiers in ermine and velvet, silk and lace, sprawled on the floor or across chairs, hands trailing limply over the arms.

‘Sleeping,’ Jo murmured, ‘all sleeping …’

‘And not just sleeping, Jo - but dreaming …’

Jo gulped. She was about to ask what they were going to do, and where this butler might be, when behind her she heard a jangling bell and sudden, familiar laughter.

She turned abruptly - just in time to see a flash of green vanishing round a corner.

Anger, powerful as the love she had felt before, surged in Jo’s heart.

She knew she had to act on it. She could not resist.

‘Sly?’ Jo darted. ‘Come here, you little -‘

‘What?’ The Doctor reeled. ‘Jo -‘

I’ve got to get him -‘

‘No -‘ The Doctor tried to grab Jo, but was too late. Already she had

vanished through a doorway, and the doorway had slammed shut behind her.

§

What was he to do?

The Doctor slapped the palm of his hand against the door. He looked down at the phaser in his hand. There was no way he could delay now, and go in pursuit of Jo. He would just have to trust that the little sprite meant her no real harm.

Was that too much to hope?

But for now, the Doctor had a new problem.

A voice came: ‘Doctor, I think you call yourself?’

This time, the Doctor turned slowly. Confronting him was the familiar, black-garbed figure of a man who, very recently, had tried to kill him.

‘We’ve met, you may recall,’ resumed the cold, cynical voice, ‘though of course, we haven’t been formally introduced. Esnic’s my name - Lord Esnic.’

‘Charmed, I’m sure.’

Smiling, the sinister chief of guards gestured to the Doctor’s phaser. ‘By the way, I think you’ll find that thing’s of no use now. I’ve turned off the impulse power all over the sanctum ship.’

‘Oh?’ The Doctor aimed towards the wall and fired.

Nothing happened.

With a shrug, he threw the phaser down. ‘Well, I’ve never liked guns.

But why should you turn off the power? Expecting to meet someone, were you?’ ‘Yes, Doctor - you.’ The Doctor gave a grimacing smile. ‘Oh, and what do you propose we

do now? Play tiddlywinks?’ ‘I don’t propose, Doctor, I command,’ said Esnic, evidently in no mood

for jokes. ‘Tell me, don’t you wonder why I’m still awake?’ ‘Perhaps … someone lets you be awake.’ ‘Or something? Is that what you mean, Doctor? ‘Perhaps the Nightdreamer King?’

Esnic’s eyes glowed. In that moment, the Doctor could have caught him off guard. He cried out, lunging forward - but now, in a sizzle of light, a paralysing ray burst from Esnic’s eyes.

The Doctor fell back, clutching his chest.

Smiling again, Esnic raised a hand, and two sleeping guards lumbered forward like leather-clad zombies, picking up the helpless Doctor like a sack.

‘Really, Doctor, is my master such a fool?’ mused Esnic, in a mocking voice. ‘But fear not, your end is not yet nigh. After all, we have a use for you - a very special use. Guards, this way!’

§

‘Sly? Where are you, Sly?’

Jo looked uneasily around the strange chamber. Silvery flickerings provided the only light, a faint reflection of the chaos outside - the whirling foliage, the churning visions - played out in weird silence behind the thick glass windows. Jo made out scattered toys, picture-books, musty dressing-up clothes.

What was this place?

‘Come on, Sly, I know you’re here.’

Jo wished she had never followed the little sprite, and wondered what had possessed her.

But then, she thought, the answer was easy.

Jingle-jingle-jangle!

‘Sly?’ Jo turned. She blundered forward. Too late, she realised that there was something binding her ankles - a length of plasti-rope, suddenly pulled tight.

Lurching, she crashed into a dark, unknown shape.

‘Ouch!’ It was a rocking-horse, and Jo had set it rocking. Stumbling back against a shelf of dolls, she saw the grinning, bridled mouth and

a glistening moving in and out of a shaft of light with a sinister, creaking insistence.

But there was something else. The horse's mane was flying up, the hairs standing on end; then the horse was flying up too, rising into the air. All around it, dark toys - a stuffed tiger, a spangled cape - came

whirling up in their turn.

And Jo rose with them.

She foundered. She flailed. Above her, a many-windowed dolls' house butted at the ceiling, revolving weirdly as if it were in space; a little tea service clattered forth, floating; tiny tables and chairs collided, clicking and clacking, while blank-faced, shabby dolls swam through the strange light, with flying braids and petticoats and fixed, reaching hands.

Jo had to hang on to something. But what?

There was a burst of green stars, and when the stars faded Sly was on the rocking horse, head flung back, riding the wooden creature like a bucking bronco.

Jingle-jangle! Jingle-jangle!

The plasti-rope round Jo's ankles jerked hard. She struggled, but the plasti-rope was long, and now she saw that Sly clutched the end of it in his hand. He whizzed around her on the flying horse, battering away dolls and tiny tea cups, tethering Jo swiftly.

'Gravity decay, gravity decay!' his crazed voice gabbled. 'Ah, who could have thought it could reach so far? All in place, then all at once - snap!'

'Sly, what are you doing? Sly, let me -' Jingle-jangle! 'Gravity decay, grav-grav-gravity! Dear me, I think we'd be better off back in the sanctum ship, don't you?' Jo almost sobbed in her helplessness. 'You evil little monster! What are you-'

Jangle-jingle! 'Gravity decay, deca-deca-cay! Ah, but something's going on in the presence chamber, Little Miss Jo - something I think you won't want to miss!'

Jo screamed in rage, but Sly only laughed - and laughed, and laughed.

§

‘Who dares disturb my meditation?’

Again Duke Altero rose from the depths, but this time the electrotapers revealed a figure frighteningly changed. Green sparkles played around him. His long hair and beard waved in the air. Convulsive tremblings racked his frame and his ornate robes slithered and pulsed with strange lights.

With eyes ablaze, the fearsome figure stared upon the scene before him.

Goaded by brutal, sleepwalking guards, the Doctor staggered towards the dais.

Handcuffs tethered his wrists. The guards, phasers at the ready, forced him to his knees.

Esnic stepped forward. ‘Mighty One, I bring you the one they call -‘

‘Time Lord, you have defied me too many times!’ boomed the voice from the dais.

Lights flickered and flashed. Smoke billowed.

‘Defied you - you, Duke Altero?’ cried the Doctor. ‘But you’re not Duke Altero any more, are you?’

Rage showed in the fiery eyes, but the Duke made no reply.

‘Are you in there, Altero?’ the Doctor cried out, heedless of the threatening guards all around him. ‘Listen, I say! Can you hear me, Duke?’

Cringingly, Esnic slithered closer to the dais, like a black, leathery snake. ‘Mighty One, shall I silence him?’

The reply was contemptuous. ‘Leave him, fool! In moments, the Time Lord’s mental powers shall be mine - mine, as they were destined to be! Time Lord, you are privileged to fuel my transformation!’

The Doctor spoke through gritted teeth. ‘You’ve tried twice before, Norebo Worm.

Can’t you see that you’ve met your match? You can’t make me one of your Nightdreamers - I’ll never give in …’

‘Never, Time Lord?’ Now even the Duke’s voice was changing, becoming high and fluting. The voice - but it was many voices now - came no longer only from the Duke’s mouth, but from every corner of the gloomy, gothic chamber. ‘Ah, but you just have to relax. Let down your guard - let down your guard, and let me take your mind!’

‘It’s no good,’ muttered the Doctor. ‘Norebo Worm, face the truth. For how many centuries have you hidden inside this moon? You gave this moon life - but look at it now! All this time you’ve been dying slowly. You can try to hold off death, but what’s the good? Your death has come!’

‘Never - no, never!’ The voices became ghastly, inhuman shriekings, filling the chamber with deafening force. Green rays, like lightning, zigzagged round the dais.

Then the shriekings turned into laughter - at first wild, then swooping down into a playful, wheedling caress. ‘Ah, Time Lord, but there has been a misunderstanding. I said you would assist my transformation, and a transformation it will be. Why, I am not dying - me, dying?’

A suspicion - an extraordinary suspicion - flashed through the Doctor’s mind.

His eyes widened. ‘You mean … The moon’s a cocoon?’

‘Enough!’ The dais shook. ‘I tire of these preliminaries. Guards, bring the Time Lord closer. Through these borrowed eyes I shall stare into his face as I drain away the mighty forces of his mind. Prepare yourself, Time Lord. There is no escape!’

The guards dragged the Doctor forward. Uselessly, he struggled against the brutal sleepwalkers. ‘It’s no good, I tell you! Push me, pummel me all you like, but you can’t take my mind! Only if I yield - and I’ll never yield!’

‘Oh, but you will, Time Lord,’ said the Norebo Worm, laughing. ‘Sly, my little minion - Sly, where are you?’

There was a green flash and the sprite appeared, cavorting merrily around the dais.

Jingle-jangle! Jingle-jangle!

‘Majesty, shall I show him my handiwork?’

‘Show him, Sly - show him!’

The little green man snapped his fingers and a second figure appeared, tethered tightly in plasti-rope.

The Doctor burst out, ‘Jo!’

Staggering, Jo collapsed to the floor.

This altered everything.

‘What have you done to her?’ the Doctor demanded, his voice hoarse with anguish, gazing wildly upon the demented, grinning Sly.

‘Nothing, Time Lord - yet,’ sniggered the sprite. ‘But isn’t it perfect? Isn’t my master clever?’ Bounding forward, the pugnacious little fellow shoved his face up towards the Doctor’s. ‘Yield to my master - or the girl dies!’

Again came the voice of the Norebo Worm. ‘You hear the choice, Time Lord. And there is no choice, is there? Even now, I read enough of your mind to see that you are a sentimental fool. Guards, bring him to me!’

Blank-eyed, Esnic ushered them ahead.

Jo rallied, twisting in her bonds. ‘Doctor … no!’

But there was nothing the Doctor could do. Setting his jaw, he let the sleepwalkers haul him up the dais. Duke Altero’s wizened hands reached out. Greed - but no mere human greed - shone through the old man’s eyes as he clutched the Doctor’s head, as if about to crush it.

Jo sank down again. A whirlwind of lights filled the chamber. The floor shuddered, lightning fizzed and flashed, and Jo could only look on in horror as image after image cascaded in the air, torn from the depths of the Doctor’s mind. Jo glimpsed Daleks, Sea Devils, Ice Warriors. She saw their friends from UNIT, the Brigadier and Sergeant Benton and Mike Yates. She saw images of the Doctor’s first two incarnations: the old, crotchety-looking man and the funny little mop-haired fellow, dressed like a tramp.

‘Stop it … Stop it,’ Jo sobbed.

Sly sat cross-legged beside her, humming distractedly, a carefree smile upon his wicked little face. ‘Never mind, my dear. Not much longer

now, and all will be as my master desires.'

But Sly was wrong.

Suddenly, a siren wailed.

The images slowed, then stopped.

'Who dares disturb my meditation?'

Again came the angry, inevitable question, this time in the voices of the Norebo Worm. Confusion filled Duke Altero's face and the wizened hands slithered away reluctantly from the Doctor's head.

Esnic's face flickered into life. 'We're … We're under attack!'

Springing forward, the chief of guards made for a huge carved fireplace that dominated one side of the cavernous chamber. Urgently, he pulled at a tasselled cord and the fireplace swung round, revealing in its place a formidable control panel, with innumerable dials and toggle-switches and little winking lights standing out from its sleek surface of gunmetal grey.

Above it, a tapestry on the wall fell away. Behind it was a huge round screen like a vast porthole - and filling the screen was a space-battleship, immense and approaching fast, guns bristling from its armoured hull.

'A Darkship,' Esnic gasped. 'The Darklings have come!'

And now a new voice crackled into life. Radioed across the void of space, it boomed through the presence chamber like a knell of doom. 'Hail, all hail the Darkling Lords! Duke Altero, we are here to take this moon. Surrender, or we destroy your castle!'

Esnic staggered, a hand across his mouth. He twisted writhed, as if in the grip of contending forces. Duke Altero convulsed in his chair. 'Interlopers! Who are these interlopers?' The voices of the Norebo Worm rose to a screech. The Doctor, meanwhile, had slumped down, spent. The guards awoke,

blinking - and Sly, for the first time, looked frightened, confused.

Jo chafed at her bonds. 'Doctor … Doctor?'

But now a new chaos consumed the chamber, as all the energies of the Norebo Worm were channelled out into space.

‘Fools, fools!’ came the voices again. ‘Do the fools think they will deflect me now -

now, on the brink of my transformation? Die, interlopers!’

There was an explosion, rocking the castle.

Jo turned, startled. On the screen she saw a searing ray, surging out from the Darkship. The castle, it seemed, was doomed - but now came a fizz of green, like a shield of light, deflecting the ray out into space.

‘It’s the end!’ Sly screamed.

But the battle was only beginning. Again and again the Darklings fired; again and again the Norebo Worm repelled the destructive rays. Boomings and burstings filled the castle, reverberating through its metallic halls. In the presence chamber, ancient portraits and stuffed, antlered heads crashed to the floor. Furniture slid in all directions.

Courtiers cowered.

And all the time Sly only hunched over, sobbing. Distractedly, he grabbed the Atinati weed from his buttonhole and began to rip off its petals, one by one.

Beside him, Jo tugged at her bonds. With anxious eyes she gazed towards the dais, and the alarmingly inert form of the Doctor. If only he would move! If only she could go to him! Then she had an idea. She leaned forward, crying out over the cacophony, ‘Sly, stop destroying that flower … Sly, listen to me.’

The little man would not look up. ‘I won’t. You don’t like me.’

‘That’s rich. You tied me up, remember?’

‘My master made me. It was his idea.’ Rip, rip.

Jo goaded, ‘So you’d let me go?’

‘I didn’t say that! Why, my master -‘

‘But you’d like your freedom, wouldn’t you?’

Rip. Sly sniffed. ‘My … freedom?’

‘We’ve got to stop this battle -‘

‘Why? What do I care who wins?’ Rip.

‘Sly, stop that - please!’ Jo’s voice grew urgent. ‘Look, what if neither wins - what if we win? Sly, there’s a way.’ He stopped ripping the petals, and gave Jo a suspicious glance. ‘What way?’ ‘The Vorgon ray. Go back to the TARDIS. Release Tonio and Ria, break the spell, and -‘ Leaping up, Sly stuffed the Atinati weed back into his buttonhole and clapped his hands excitedly. ‘It’s a brilliant idea! ‘But first,’

Jo said quickly, ‘this rope stuff -‘ There was no time. In a trice, the little man had vanished into a sparkling haze, leaving Jo tied up.

She sighed. But she was alarmed more than annoyed. By the dais, the Doctor had still not stirred; spasm after spasm of pain wracked Duke Altero’s body.

And on and on went the thunder of war.

§

The lights in the TARDIS control room were dim, glowing only from the roundels in the walls. It was a tranquil scene, but ominous. The estranged lovers, Ria and Tonio, had fallen into a trance-like state, while the sleepy Peterkin hunched over like a discarded doll, his monster’s head fallen away, revealing the tousle-haired, boyish fellow beneath.

Green sparkles filled the gloom, a bell jangled, and Sly was there. He looked round, sighed, then danced around the console with leaden, languorous steps. Familiar, strange music filled the air, and as he danced, Sly sang a melancholy, regretful ditty:

My name is Sly And I decry My mischievous intention: So let me see My victims free Of all this past dissension!

With a sad smile, the little man plucked the remnants of the Atinati weed from his buttonhole and bent down first over Ria, then Tonio, squeezing the last of the juice into their eyes.

‘My last act of magic,’ he said in a solemn voice. ‘The last magic I’ll ever see.’

He scurried back, hiding behind the console as the lovers woke.

‘Wh-what happened?’ said Ria. ‘Tonio, I -‘

‘A dream,’ murmured her lover, ‘I had the strangest dream -‘

They rushed together, embracing, but their joy was brief. Suddenly, Ria cried out.

She broke away.

‘My love, what is it?’ said Tonio, confused.

In reply, Ria only pointed to the scanner.

Tonio gasped. ‘A Darkship! And it’s -‘

Ria grabbed his hand. ‘The Vorgon ray! Tonio, it’s our only chance -‘

With that, the lovers rushed from the TARDIS.

§

‘Freedom … Freedom!’

For a time, Esnic had been wracked by his own spasms. He had twisted, clutched his head, collapsed to the floor. Now his mind was his own again. Rushing back to the control panel, he slammed down a lever.

The impulse power!

He grabbed his phaser, shooting a random blast.

‘Yes!’ He swung towards the dais. Triumphantly, he gazed on the tormented figure in the throne-like chair. ‘You’ve lost your hold on me now - Altero, Nightdreamer King, whatever you are! For how long have I endured your rule? Stupid old fool! And you never knew I was a Darkling agent!’

He strode forward, phaser aimed and ready. On the screen, the battle continued.

‘Victory,’ Esnic sneered. ‘Victory for the Darklings!’

‘No … No!’ Jo cried.

‘Traitor!’ A blast seared out - but not Esnic’s. It ripped the phaser from his hand and he fell back, stunned.

Jo was startled. Swivelling round, she saw a wild-haired, bespectacled

old fellow, solemnly lowering his own phaser. With surprising agility he loped towards her, grabbed a knife from his jacket, and severed her bonds.

‘We haven’t met, my dear,’ he muttered, ‘but -‘

‘The butler? But … the Doctor! Is he -‘

Desperately, they blundered towards the unmoving figure.

§

In the TARDIS, Peterkin the cobbler stretched and yawned. As if in response, the control room became lighter, resuming its accustomed brightness.

‘A dream?’ Peterkin blinked. ‘But such a strange -‘

Sly crept forward. Before, his manner had been sad and fearful; now it was something else again. When he spoke, his voice was a tremulous whisper. ‘And I thought I’d seen my last magic! Brother … can it really be you?’

‘B-Brother?’ Peterkin looked up.

Then his eyes grew wide, and filled with tears.

Marvelling, the brothers staggered into each other’s arms, but they had barely embraced before a fearsome wheezing filled the control room, and the time rotor juddered upwards like a huge, glowing piston.

‘Wh-what’s happening?’ gulped Peterkin.

Wildly, the brothers exchanged glances.

§

‘Doctor!’ Jo gasped. ‘Doctor!’

‘I only hope he can forgive me for doubting him,’ blurted the supposed butler. ‘What a fool I’ve been - ah, but this has been a night for folly …’ Worriedly, the old fellow shouted in the Doctor’s ear. ‘Doctor, can you hear me? Can you forgive me, Doctor?’

‘Doctor!’ Jo shook his shoulder. ‘Doctor, please -‘

Quite suddenly, the Doctor looked up. ‘Did somebody say my name? Ah. Munex, old chap, good to see you -‘

Jo cried, ‘Doctor, I thought you were -‘

‘Even my brain takes time to recover from an ordeal like that, Jo,’ said the Doctor, smiling. ‘But Munex, what about you? Wasn’t your mind taken over too?’

‘Not completely.’ The old fellow, his apologies forgotten, gestured to the dais, and a look of sorrowing comprehension filled his face. ‘A part of him is still Altero, I’m sure of that much - and I’m sure he senses who I really am. No, my old friend Altero couldn’t -‘

But Munex had no time to explain. On the screen, the battle heightened in intensity, while the boomings in the castle were louder, wilder.

And now came a familiar foghorning sound. Jo started. The Doctor reeled round. As for Munex, he only raised his eyebrows as something he had never seen before, a blue London police box, suddenly materialised in the presence chamber.

‘Remarkable! Is it done with mirrors?’

There was no time to explain. The door of the TARDIS swung open, and staggering out came the greenish, frightened-looking figure of Peterkin the cobbler. Under one arm he held his monster’s head, its papier-mâché more than a little crushed; his other arm was draped around a bedraggled Sly.

‘My brother,’ gasped Peterkin, ‘my … brother -‘

‘But the TARDIS,’ said Jo, ‘how could they -‘

‘They didn’t do anything,’ the Doctor said grimly. ‘It’s the Norebo Worm, drawing them back. Drawing back his minions - for the final attack.’

Her mind reeling, Jo struggled to take in the fearful words. ‘Doctor, what do you mean? And what about Ria? And Tonio, and - Doctor!’

What happened next was more alarming still. Terrified, Jo covered her mouth as first one, then another of many human figures appeared before them, half-transparent, ranging themselves in a semicircle round the dais.

Phantoms? Ghosts?

But they were becoming real.

‘The Nightdreamers,’ said the Doctor.

Jo nodded, gazing upon them in astonishment. Some were servants, some fine courtiers, but all were blank-eyed, moving like zombies. Jo saw a beautiful woman with raven-black hair, a woman she had seen before. The players were there too - Mazy Grace the chambermaid, Gubrious the chaplain, Nora the cook and the gardener, Weed …

Helplessly, Peterkin and Sly joined them.

The end had come. Green sparkles played around the Nightdreamers, then surged into powerful, searing waves of force. In moments, they would all be annihilated, all their energies consumed by the creature that lived inside the moon.

But now, on the screen, a familiar ship swooped into view, tiny against the Darkship’s menacing vastness.

Jo leapt up excitedly.

‘Sly - he did it!’ she exclaimed. ‘It’s Ria and Tonio -‘

‘Ria … Tonio?’ echoed Munex, alarmed.

§

The booming, the bursting, the thrumming and throbbing in the castle rose higher and higher. Light pulsed from every surface. The Doctor and his friends sank to their knees. They clutched their ears.

But still they watched the screen.

A ray burst from Tonio’s Lightship, enveloping the black battle cruiser, just as the intensity in the castle rose to its highest pitch. There was a mighty explosion, a blinding flash - then came sudden, strange silence. And on the screen, only a flurry of debris. The silence lengthened. The debris floated down, endlessly down

through the blackness of space.

Jo had turned pale. Her voice was hoarse. ‘Doctor, I … I told Sly to -‘

‘Tonio!’ Munex, clutching his heart, staggered to a chair.

Another voice came: ‘Ria … Not my Ria -‘

It was Duke Altero. All around the chamber, the sleepers had awakened. The players blinked, staring at each other with puzzled eyes. Courtiers sneezed and wiped the dust from their robes - and the beautiful woman with raven-black hair turned, wide-eyed, to Duke Altero.

‘My love … have I been sleeping?’

The old man staggered down from the dais. ‘I … I feared you would never wake -‘

They fell together, embracing, husband and wife back together at last.

‘Doctor, what’s happening?’ Jo tore her eyes from the joyful reunion. ‘Why has it gone so silent? Why are they all awake? And Ria, Tonio, can they really-‘

‘Jo, listen - can you hear that sound?’

A new, low humming echoed through the castle. But only Jo and the Doctor heeded it.

Excitedly, Peterkin was introducing his long-lost brother Sly to the other players, while the raven-haired Duchess, her face becoming troubled, asked the Duke where their daughter might be.

And now Munex came forward.

At first Duke Altero looked puzzled - then still more puzzled as the old fellow removed his spectacles, then his wild-haired wig.

Jo forgot the mysterious humming. ‘Doctor, look -‘

Oblivious, the Doctor was thinking hard. Rushing to the control panel, he did not even watch as Duke Altero was reconciled with Emperor Exis Umane - and the Duchess, once again, was united with her brother. A sad speech followed.

The Emperor began, ‘Can you forgive me, Altero, as I forgive you? You were a hot-tempered fool, but right about the Darklings. Ah, old friend, we have both been fools. And now, our children have paid the terrible price of our -‘

A metallic CLANG! rang through the chamber, and the old man broke off. ‘The docking bay? But -‘

From the corridor came a rapid thumping of boots. Then there was laughter, and a high-pitched cry. The doors whizzed open, and in burst Ria and Tonio.

‘I don’t believe it!’ Jo exclaimed, leaping up excitedly.

‘Father -‘ Tonio rushed to the Emperor.

‘Father,’ Ria gasped, ‘and … Mother? Mother?’

‘My son, we thought you were killed,’ sobbed the Emperor, enfolding his son in his arms.

Courtiers, servants and guards alike looked on, enraptured.

‘We missed the blast by a hair’s breadth,’ laughed Tonio. ‘Father, don’t cry … It’s all over now.’

‘I’m afraid that’s where you’re wrong.’ The Doctor turned from the control panel.

While the others spoke he had been flipping switches, setting dials.

A volcanic rippling shuddered through the chamber.

‘We’re taking off?’ Duke Altero staggered, confused.

‘Doctor, what’s happening?’ said Jo. ‘Why -‘

‘You wondered why it went quiet, Jo? If I’m right, the Norebo Worm absorbed all the energy from that explosion.’

‘That means it’s let us go? It doesn’t need us?’

‘Jo, it means the creature’s transforming - underneath us, right now.’

‘Transforming?’ said Tonio. ‘But-‘

There was no time to explain. ‘Let’s just hope we can get clear in time.’

The Doctor swung back to the control panel. Groanings filled the castle as old, ill-tended rocket engines flamed into life, and the

sanctum ship blasted into space.

Jo went to the Doctor's side. 'You mean this moon -'

'It's going to explode, Jo. I'm sure of it.'

Fear filled the presence chamber.

Then came confusion, as a familiar but forgotten figure leapt up from the floor.

'Esnic -' Jo turned, alarmed.

The traitor had been biding his time. Now he had no time to lose. He went for Gubrious, grabbing the chaplain's phaser - then pirouetted suddenly, seizing Ria.

She struggled. 'Let me go -'

'No one move!' Esnic shouted. His voice cracking with madness, the sinister figure hustled Ria to the door. 'I'm taking the girl - the girl is mine!'

The Emperor began, 'Traitor, leave her -'

'I'll kill you -' Tonio started forward, but a phaser-blast fizzed past his head.

'Doctor, what can we do?' said Jo.

'The phaser switch -' The Doctor's eyes flickered across the control panel.

So many switches. But which one?

It did not matter. Already Esnic was at the door, and the docking bay was just a short sprint away. Screaming, Ria writhed in his brutal grip.

Suddenly, Sly leapt forward. If the little man had lost his magic, he had not lost his agility. Flipping across the floor, he lashed out, knocking the phaser from Esnic's hand.

'Bravo, Sly!'

The players rushed in, pummelling Esnic mercilessly. Nora kicked his shins. Mazy Grace slapped him round the head. Gubrious snatched his phaser, and Peterkin and Weed, with what was almost bravery, tugged

Ria away.

She rushed back to Tonio.

‘Curse you!’ Esnic cried, but before anyone could stop him, he sprinted for the docking bay.

‘The fool -‘ called the Doctor.

It was too late. The roar of a motor echoed through the sanctum ship, and Esnic was gone. ‘Look!’ Jo pointed to the screen.

By now, the dying moon of Verd was far below them, its surface convulsed by rippling quakes. And now the stolen Lightship hurtled into view.

‘What’s he doing?’ said Ria. ‘He’s heading back to Verd!’

‘He’s out of control,’ said Tonio. ‘The gravity -‘

‘It’s … It’s sucking him in, he can’t -‘

Down, down, went the Lightship. Several times it jerked up, only to be dragged back again. Esnic must have struggled like a ravening beast, but already he was caught in a force beyond his control, spiralling down to his flaming death.

‘The end of a traitor,’ muttered Duke Altero.

Ria hid her face in Tonio’s shoulder.

But the drama had one last act to play. Suddenly, the green moon of Verd exploded.

Screams rang through the sanctum ship.

The floor lurched. Lights flickered. Bodies sprawled in all directions and rocky chunks ominously battered the hull. Smoke billowed from the control panel.

But the chaos was brief. When the ship was still again, a strange, ravishing music played on the air, and a startling sight confronted them on the screen.

Ria rose to her feet. ‘What can it be?’

Jo breathed, ‘But I thought it would be a monster.’

Instead, where the moon had been there was an immense and bizarrely alien creature, hovering in space. Mighty wings arched from its back, swirling with complex, many-coloured patterns that shifted and changed, fluorescing weirdly, with each moment that passed. The strangely graceful body appeared to be clad in jewels, twinkling and flashing; innumerable,, translucent tentacles hung beneath it waving and twisting as if the creature floated, like a glowing vision or dream, in the depths of a fathomless ocean. Every so often, part of the creature would vanish, as if it shimmered precariously, like gauze, through the doorways of other dimensions.

As the creature turned slowly in space, like a royal barge in its stately progress, the watchers saw the gold and silver spikes that jutted, crown-like, from its inscrutable, faceless head. Later, many of them would find the fantastical vision almost impossible to remember or describe. All they would know was that it dazzled them, and that they could only stare upon it, mesmerised, as waves of well-being, like cosmic rays, washed gently all around them.

Never, in all their lives, had any of them - not even the Doctor, in all his travels - seen anything so beautiful.

‘Astonishing,’ he whispered.

Jo, speechless, clung to his arm.

Wonderingly, Ria and Tonio kissed.

The Duke, Duchess and Emperor linked hands.

Peterkin and Sly exchanged happy glances.

All through the chamber, there were smiles, embraces - tears too, but they were tears of joy - until at last, with sudden rapidity, the magnificent nameless creature that had once been the Norebo Worm fluttered its wings, soared through space, and vanished into a blur of rainbow colours.

‘Trans-dimensional,’ murmured the Doctor. ‘Well, I wonder where it’s gone to now?’

The strange music faded slowly, and Jo looked questioningly into the

Doctor's face.

'Just as I thought,' he said with a smile. 'The moon was its cocoon.'

Epilogue

‘Bravo … Bravo!’

Rapturous applause filled the presence chamber as the five players, blushing shyly, took their bows. The play, it was true, had not been entirely successful. Nora, more than once, had giggled and forgotten her lines; Mazy Grace had scratched herself on Gubrious’s ivy; Peterkin’s mask had fallen off, just when the monster was making his attack; and Weed had been confused about when he was meant to be the man, and when he was meant to be the mouse.

None of it mattered. A concluding song, performed by Sly, had lifted the performance splendidly; besides, Ria and Tonio were married now, and everyone was happy.

Or almost everyone.

A glass clinked, and Duke Altero held up his hands for silence. In a voice very different from his voice of the night before, the old man proposed a toast to the five players - but no, the six - who had entertained them so well.

Courtiers and servants alike raised their glasses.

‘Do you think our dreams will come true now?’ whispered Mazy Grace.

‘On Galaxis Bright? I’m sure of it,’ Weed said, grinning.

Soon it would be time to land. Vastly, the silvery planet filled the visiscreen -

and filled the heart of Mazy Grace with new, thrilling dreams. Squeezing Weed’s spindly arm, she gazed happily at her friends. Peterkin and Sly, inseparable, looked as if they would be up to mischief soon; even Gubrious was happy. Performing the wedding ceremony, the chaplain had been more than a little nervous; now, arm in arm with Nora, he was grinning like a fool.

There were further toasts: to the Duchess; to the Doctor; to Jo; to Emperor Exis Umane.

‘But forgive me my dear friends,’ said Duke Altero, ‘if I reserve my last

and most special toast for my daughter Ria - and for Prince Tonio, who, as I know now, is certain to make her the best of husbands. Forgive me, my children, for all my folly … To Ria and Tonio!'

'To Ria and Tonio!' The Doctor leaned towards Jo. 'Well, I think we can say that all's well-'

'That ends well? Hm.' Jo smiled brightly, but seemed a little subdued as they said their goodbyes to their new friends, and made their way to the TARDIS.

'Must you go, Doctor?' said Emperor Exis Umane. He gestured to the visiscreen.

'Great challenges lie ahead of us - we've a world to rebuild. Besides, the Darklings will be back. My court could sorely use a man of your talents And a lady of Jo's beauty,' he added gallantly, 'would of course be a most welcome ornament.'

Jo struggled not to roll her eyes, and the Doctor said quickly, 'Oh, I think you can do without us. After all, you've got men like Tonio. And women like Ria.'

The Emperor would not give up so easily. 'Come, Doctor, think of the position you could hold on Galaxis Bright! A peerage is yours for the asking. Shouldn't you like to be a baron … a viscount … an earl?'

'Oh, I'm happy being the Doctor. Come on, Jo.'

'A marquis … a duke?' the Emperor continued, recklessly ascending the grades of the peerage. 'And what about … Lady Jo?'

Jo's eyes brightened, but the Doctor gave her a stern look.

Their new friends milled around the TARDIS. For the last time, Jo embraced Ria, then Tonio. From the blue doorway she looked back at them fondly, trying not to let her gaze linger too long upon Tonio.

She did not quite succeed.

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'Are you all right, Jo?' the Doctor said kindly, as he set the controls. 'Now let's see, where were we going before we were so rudely interrupted?'

'Metebelis III?' Jo smiled weakly.

‘Oh, you’ll love Metebelis III, Jo, the famous blue planet -‘

‘Of the Acteon Galaxy, I know.’

Jo toyed with a strand of her hair, struggling, not quite successfully, to quell her sadness. Again as on Spiridon, the thought came to her that perhaps her days with the Doctor might be coming to an end. Much as she loved her extraordinary adventures with the Time Lord, Jo had begun to think there might be more to life. To her life, at least.

She thought of Ria and Tonio, and a surge of envy rose in her heart.

But no, she must push these thoughts away.

‘Funny, isn’t it, about the Norebo Worm?’ she remarked after a moment, her voice filled with a strained brightness. ‘Quite a transformation!’

Glowing with light, the time rotor wheezed up and down.

‘Oh, a lot of things aren’t what we expect them to be, my dear.’ Smiling, the Doctor draped a comforting arm around Jo’s shoulder. ‘Good and evil are mingled strangely, and sometimes we can’t even tell which is which. Under the ground, the creature was a monster - and when we saw it at last it was something beautiful.’

‘And something good, Doctor?

‘Who knows?’

Jo shook her head. ‘It still seems like a dream.’

‘Really, Jo?’ said the Doctor. ‘But what is reality? And what are dreams?’ The TARDIS whirled through the vortex of time.

If we shadows have offended Think but this, and all is mended - That you have but slumbered here, While these visions did appear …

About The Author

Tom Arden was born in Australia and has lived in Ireland and England since 1990. His principal work is The Orokon, a million-word, five volume sequence of novels comprising The Harlequin's Dance (1997), The King and Queen of Swords (1998), Sultan of the Moon and Stars (1999), Sisterhood of the Blue Storm (2000) and Empress of the Endless Dream (2001). Set in an imaginary eighteenth-century world, this darkly comic fantasy epic has been variously described as 'grotesque', marvellously camp', 'a sprawling baroque tapestry', and 'a feverish cross between Georgette Heyer and Mervyn Peake.'

He has also written the offbeat gothic mystery Shadow Black, while other publications include short stories, columns, and reviews in magazines including the Times Literary Supplement and Interzone.

Tom Arden was educated at the University of Adelaide where he acquired a PhD in English literature. For seven years he was a lecturer in English, and he has been a full-time writer since 1998. Among other interests he cites music, theatre and travel. He has also been a Doctor Who fan since he was a child, when Doctor Who was one of the first programmes he saw after his parents finally, and reluctantly, acquired a television set. He vividly remembers the programme from the Jon Pertwee period.